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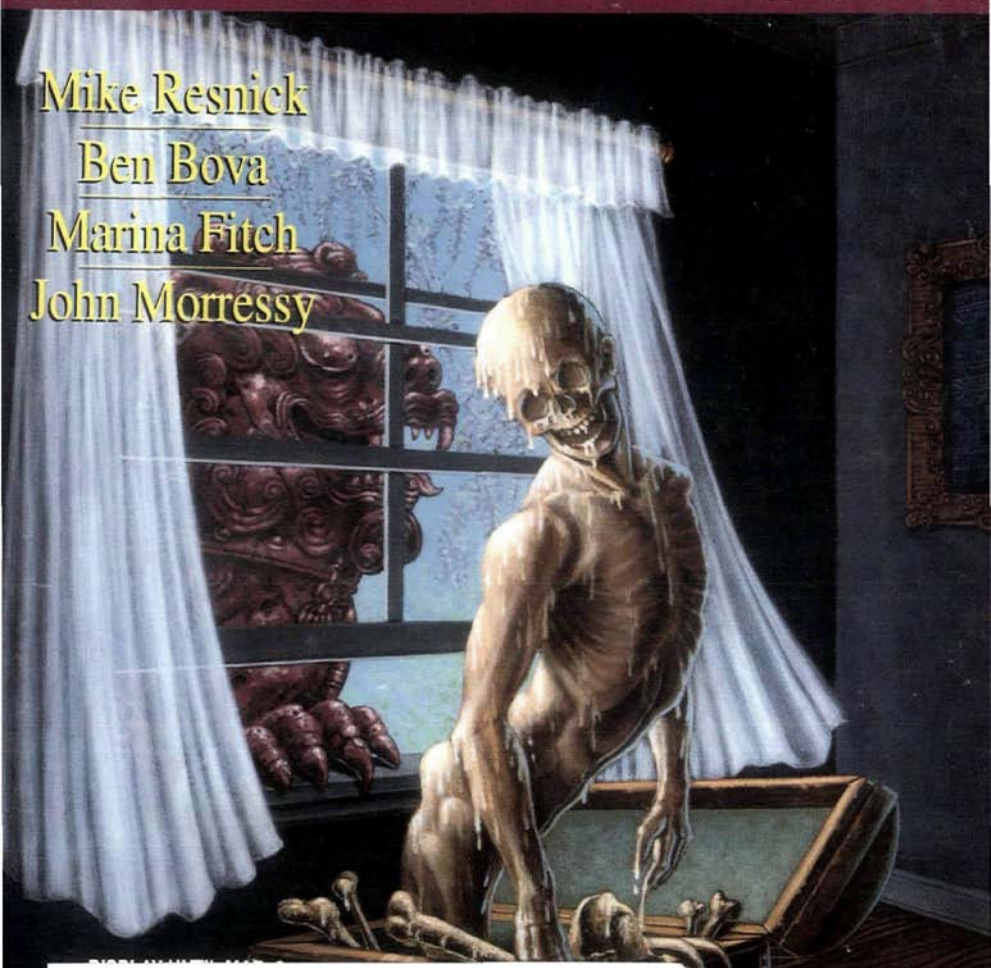

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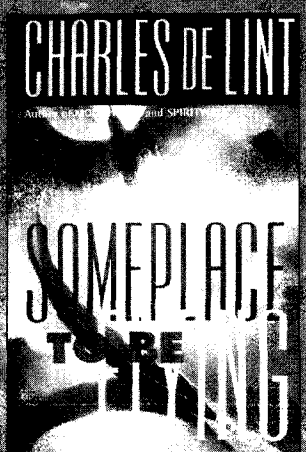

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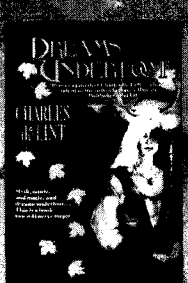

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In "The Familiar" last March, Albert Cowdrey showed us some of the uncanny doings transpiring on Azalea Place in New Orleans. You may recall a nosy neighbor by the name of Mrs. DeSaye and a four-foot-tall marble Foo dog (part dog, part lion) that was not all it seemed. Well, after a bit of rumination, Mr. Cowdrey felt he needed to return to the same locale in New Orleans (where he himself now resides) in order to investigate the question of how it was that old Mrs. DeSaye came by that title "Mrs." in the first place...

White Magic

By Albert E. Cowdrey

BY DISAPPEARING, MRS. DeSaye — our block captain and neighborhood bane — caused a sigh of relief to pass through the quiet homes and walled gardens of Azalea Place in uptown New Orleans. If the case had been left up to my neighbors, nobody would have investigated for fear of finding her.

But the cops had their duties to perform. I was still in a wheelchair from injuries officially attributed to a hit-and-run driver when a polite, pudgy black detective called upon me. I recognized him; he had visited Azalea Place once before, when a severed hand had been found next door. I answered his questions about Mrs. DeSaye as truthfully as anybody was likely to, under the circumstances.

Yes, I said, I was probably the last person to see her before she vanished. She had dropped in that afternoon at my invitation to drink coffee and eat biscotti and chat. No, we weren't friends, only neighbors; her talk had all been neighborhood gossip, nothing unusual about it.

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I think my physical condition more than my answers deflected suspicion. Committing murder in a body cast would be a problem to baffle Houdini. In any case, twenty minutes were enough to satisfy the detective's curiosity. Then, just before he closed his notebook, he asked a surprising question.

"Sir, this lady have a boyfriend?"

"*Boyfriend*?"

"Yeah. Miz Toups you know? Bought the old Vidakovich place next door to Miz DeSaye? She turned in a report couple days ago, said there was a man prowling around the house. She said she thought he was, uh, nude at the time. We sent a car but they didn't find nothing."

A naked prowler at the DeSaye place. Hmm.

"I'll see you to the gate," I said, starting the motor of my wheelchair.

The garden, now under the care of my neighbor Angela, was in glorious condition and the detective turned out to be a gardener and appreciative. He liked a purple wisteria vine sprawling along one of the high board fences, and smiled a little when he noted a coil of bright concertina wire concealed among its leaves.

"Keepin' 'em out, eh?" he asked, and I gave him a friendly, slightly goofy grin that has served me well during a long lifetime. The explanation that I was saving the burglars' lives by keeping them out would have raised entirely too many questions.

At the gate he paused to admire my marble Foo Dog, who goes by the name of Foo Manchu.

"Nice," he said appreciatively. "I like oriental stuff. My wife and me have dinner sometimes at the Forbidden City, you know the place? It's Chinese Cajun. They do a great Szechuan alligator. Well, if anything else comes to you, here's my card."

I locked the gate behind him and turned to chug on back to the house. Inevitably, my mind was running on Mrs. DeSaye's last visit — the one I had described so truthfully, and with such vast omissions, to the detective.

I remembered how, when the coffee and biscotti were finished, she toyed with me in that roundabout way of hers. I was on her list, of course; we both knew it.

"I'm about to have a real event in my life," she said. "I do so *hope* you'll be around to see it."

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"Actually, I'm not planning to go anywhere."

"Oh plans," she said. "They so seldom work out, do they? Now, I've had a plan in mind for many years, but it's only lately I learned how to carry it out. Well, I'm cooking something, so now I'll have to go," she added, rising, straightening her seams with the automatic gesture of a large lady whose clothes ride up when she sits.

I said something about catching my afternoon nap, and she turned her bulging blue eyes upon me and smilingly wished me pleasant dreams. Of course she knew — being the cause of them — that my dreams were nightmares, now approaching the point of hallucinations. She could hardly have guessed that those words, "Pleasant dreams," sealed her fate.

I started the motor in my chair and courteously allowed her to precede me into the garden. Then I slammed the door behind her and turned the deadbolt.

A few seconds passed before her face appeared at the window.

She shook the bars, shouted at me, then ran to the next window and the next. Oh, I knew what that was like, to be in a garden surrounded by high fences and bright wire, hearing the lion-dog move.

How she shook the bars, wig askew, her mouth now moving soundlessly. In her abject terror she couldn't scream aloud, but she could project her emotions, her hate, anger, fear — as all her victims knew to their cost.

I felt her screaming in my brain and whirled my wheelchair around trying to escape the waves of terror and despair. A bad five minutes that was, while the creature tracked and killed her; she died not only in her own body but inside my head as well.

In my current battered state, just the memory was enough to set me trembling. I spent a while calming down, doing the Zen trick of exhaling completely and then letting nature do the inhaling for me. The garden helped, the butterflies, the rustle and chirp of sparrows, the whir of unseen wings.

After a time I chugged inside and called Angela to give her the latest news about the investigation. I was getting as bad as Mrs. DeSaye when it came to gossip — and murder by exotic means.

Angela was becoming a presence around my house. She visited at least once a day, fixed me light meals, listened patiently to my anecdotes,

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and used my backscratcher to relieve itches under the cast that I couldn't quite reach.

When the doctors cut off my cast, she helped the therapist prod, haul and push me into something approaching normal movement again. It was a long way from passion, but a relationship was taking form. One evening when I was expecting nothing special to happen, she fixed me dinner, we drank a bottle of old wine, and she stayed the night.

For a week afterward I was downright silly with joy. We talked over our future. Each of us intended to keep our own house, at least for a while, but we called in workmen and had a gate cut in the fence so that we could come and go privately. Because the new gate stood open, we shared the guardian of the place, too.

Angela planted a cape jasmine beside Foo Manchu, and the thick smell of the blossoms and the dark glossy leaves made a beautiful setting for his purple-red marble body, his whirling mane, and his furious, staring eyes. Angela and I left the doors of our houses wide open whenever we pleased, enjoying a feeling of safety and freedom that most Americans have forgotten.

I was getting about with two stout canes when the lawyer who had been appointed by the court to manage Mrs. DeSaye's estate decided to rent her house — I suppose to bring in money for its upkeep, until she could be declared legally dead. One of my first walks outside my garden since the accident took me there, with Angela holding tight to my left arm.

The reason was simple nosiness. We had called the rental agent and expressed interest on behalf of a mythical friend we said was moving to New Orleans. A pleasant, rather tense young woman named Deena, thin and chic as a fashion model, met us at the door. Together we entered the house like cats, looking from side to side and putting down our feet with caution. We talked in low voices, not wanting, I guess, to wake the dead.

"I feel like such a ghoul," whispered Angela.

"Don't worry, Mrs. DeSaye probably liked ghouls," I comforted her.

I must say the house was disappointing. Contrary to the reputation of witches, Mrs. DeSaye had been a demon housekeeper. Most of the rooms looked totally unlived in, like a decorator's exhibit. The fireplace featured clean gaslogs in a niche of spotless firebrick and a bright poker and tongs

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that had never known the touch of ashes. Driven by curiosity, I managed the stairs with help from Angela and Deena. On the second floor the only bedroom that had been in use was equally neat, with a smiling doll reposing against a neatly tucked bolster.

Mrs. DeSaye had actually lived in a large bright room at the back, where the windows gave an overview of Azalea Place. I was not surprised to see a big, old-fashioned pair of Zeiss binoculars standing on a table beside a camera with a telephoto lens. The room was a mess, with untidy leather furniture, coffee stains, decks of cards, two television sets and a VCR. Clutter everywhere. An old chaise longue was covered with dog-eared romance novels. Stands held three or four identical blonde wigs, a closet was crammed with clothes, and a dressing table with a three-way mirror overflowed with an incredible array of cosmetic tubes and bottles.

Piled around the VCR were the sort of cheap videotapes that advertisers like to call classic, meaning old — mainly featuring the Forties crowd, Gable and Garson and Cooper and Loy. Underlining Mrs. DeSaye's unsuspected love of the cinema was a yellowing print in a silver frame showing an actor I did not recognize — some sort of matinee idol with a jutting chin and a mustache only three hairs wide. The inscription, signed I supposed by the thousand for a fan club, was "Ever Yours, Desmond."

"I thought this mess had been cleaned up," apologized Deena. "I promise you, the house will be *perfect* by the time a tenant moves in."

Personally, I was glad the cleaners hadn't done their job. Then I'd never have known how a bona fide witch lives. Briefly I stuck my head in the last small room of the house, a Victorian bathroom obviously long out of use, with a chain toilet and an immense tub. A cheap lamp connected by an extension cord to a socket in the other room held one 300-watt bulb staring down at the tub. There was an unpleasant smell about, as if a pot of soup had gone bad in there, and in the bottom of the tub I saw waxy remains like leavings of old soap. Shoved back against one wall was an immense old leather suitcase. The window of frosted glass threw a diffused glare upon the floor.

Outside again, Angela and I said goodbye to Deena and then paused to look back at *la maison DeSaye* before we started for home.

"What a boring life she had," remarked Angela.

No, I thought, not true. Actually Mrs. DeSaye had been passionately

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interested in her life, polishing her floors, spying on her neighbors, deciding who her next victim would be. But I didn't say anything. *Angela*, I thought, would have been bored by a witch's life, and I was glad of that.

After that visit we might have put Mrs. DeSaye on our mental shelves. We had other things to think about, such as adjusting to each other. Then Mrs. Toups intervened. I picked up a ringing phone a few days later to hear a strange hoarse voice say, "Hello and good mornin'."

I asked who she wanted, and she said, "You and your lady friend, Honey. For wine and cheese. I saw you at the DeSaye place, but you were gone before I could run out and intrude on you."

I liked the touch of humor in "intrude." Anyway, I remembered the detective's words about the prowler and decided I would like to hear the Toups version. The upshot was that Angela and I presented ourselves about six the next evening at the comfortable old pink house where Tom Vidakovitch had died of a hex and Mrs. V of urban violence.

La Toups turned out to be exactly what I had expected, a blowsy, shrewd woman with laugh wrinkles and an active tongue. Her husband was squat and somewhat toadlike, with little twinkling gray eyes and an amphibian's large lipless mouth. They owned a tiny toy dog, a Westy I think, which growled and made threats against my ankles until restrained.

"A guy, a broad, and a pooch," Angela summed up the household, while our hosts were in the kitchen assembling the edibles. Then we heard Bessie exclaim, "Whoa!"

Dashing back into the living room, she said, "There's that sonofabitch again." In one smooth motion, she switched off the light and moved with speed and silence to a window. I followed.

There he was, a pale seemingly unclothed man in the gray dusk, climbing over the railing onto the back porch next door. Maybe we made a noise; anyway, he turned suddenly and opened the door, which I remembered was secured by a chain. He ducked under it, sliding through the opening in the magical way of a roach escaping a broom.

"How do you like *that*?" asked Bessie.

No light went on next door. The prowler was evidently a nudist who liked sitting in the dark.

"Finished?" asked her husband, bringing in a tray that smelled

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promisingly of Stilton and red wine. Bessie flicked the light back on, and we settled down for munchies and gossip.

"Bessie gets a lot of fun out of that place," Adrian observed. "Keeps her out of trouble. When our last kid left home, I told her, Get yourself a dog. She did and named him Stopgap, but he wasn't enough."

Stopgap, perhaps energized by hearing his name, lifted his tiny leg and sprinkled a gateleg table. Having marked his territory, he growled and strutted around. It seemed ridiculous to have that much personality confined in ten pounds of dogmeat and a swatch of silky hair.

Bessie was avid to know more about Mrs. DeSaye, having already heard a lot from the neighbors.

"She thought she could cast spells," I explained cautiously.

"Well, could she?"

I shook my head solemnly and deliberately put a large cracker and a wedge of cheese into my mouth.

"I never liked her," Angela told Bessie, "nobody did. At first she seemed to be just silly, but — "

"Whoa!"

Off went the light again. I thought the guy next door must be blind if he didn't know he was being watched. Nevertheless, cane and all I was standing at the window with Bessie as sounds of things opening and closing came from the DeSaye place. The stranger was searching the house — in the dark.

"It'll be like that all night," she whispered. "He's looking for something. Lord, I'd love to know what."

"Shouldn't we call the cops?" I asked.

She switched on the light again, making a face.

"Lotta good that does," she said. "They came the first time, didn't find nothing, and never answered my calls afterward. Hell with 'em, I'm not calling 'em anymore."

As we were leaving, I gave Bessie some good advice. I liked the Toupses, and the wine added to the humanitarian glow I felt.

"Watch out," I said. "Mrs. DeSaye was genuinely unpleasant. Her gentleman friend may be unpleasant, too."

As is my habit, I woke up at a little after four A.M. For a while I lay there in the dark, listening to Angela breathe. Then I got up and walked

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somewhat shakily downstairs, pulling on an old robe. I was sleeping much better of late, but this business of waking up in the dead pit of the predawn darkness hung on. I'd probably be wide awake until the first light, then fall asleep in a chair.

I stepped outside into a universe of bugs and tree frogs. The chorus fell silent around me as I crunched down the gravel path, then resumed behind me. Big cockroaches pattered like raindrops among the leaves of the banana trees. Something jumped: a toad, hunting roaches.

Foo Manchu wasn't in his usual place, and I felt a little thrill of fear, even though I knew that now he wasn't after me. I leaned against a tree, wishing I had brought my cane because my knees still felt so weak.

Then I saw a white something slide from right to left into view just outside the gate — a supple white something whose limbs stretched and contracted as it moved. It rubbed itself against the bars like a cat, and began to squeeze between them, though the gap was no more than three inches wide.

I just stared; I've no idea what I would have done if the thing had come inside. But I didn't need to do anything. With a sudden rush and growl a great solid bulk burst out of the banana trees and crashed against the gate with a clang like a cell door closing. There was a thin shriek and the visitor was gone.

Foo Manchu's arrival had startled me almost as much as the visitor. I hadn't touched him in his mobile phase since the day when he had almost killed me. I approached him now, trembling a little, and put my hand on his coarse mane. For a moment he really was a dog — or a lion — panting and giving a low, deep rumbling growl of sheer baffled fury. Then I felt his mane grow smooth and harden and become cool under my fingers. And there he sat once more, the marble Foo Dog guarding my gate.

By now a little pale light was spinning down from the sky in silky tendrils like spiderweb. I found my way back to the house, discovered I couldn't manage the stairs alone, collapsed on the living room couch and sank into profound and dreamless sleep.

Angela was upset when I told her about the visit. More upsetting news came later that day in a phone call from Deena.

"I had a prospect for the DeSaye house and discovered those damn

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housecleaners still hadn't come," she said. "Those people are *absolutely* untrustworthy. Well, I started to do some tidying up myself and I found some things I think you ought to see."

She was sitting in a wooden rocker on the front porch when I arrived. In her lap lay her purse and a pile of photographic prints. Seeing that I still had trouble climbing, she came down the steps and handed me the pictures.

The pictures documented Mrs. DeSaye's hobby of taking snapshots of her neighbors from the windows of her house. She'd wanted clear images of the face. So here was Angela's husband Joe in four murky versions and a clear one, from which the face had been cut out. Her former lover Jim Kennedy was present in half a dozen versions, all rejects, it would seem. (I never discovered where Mrs. DeSaye had finally gotten the picture she needed to help focus her destructive energy on poor Jim.)

There were other pictures of people I didn't know by sight, as well as myself in three unsatisfactory images and one with the face cut out.

"Who are they — aside from you, I mean?" asked Deena.

"The two that I knew are dead. Was this all you found?"

"No, you haven't seen the *pièce de résistance* yet."

Deena opened her small brown purse and took out a doll a few inches long and laid it in her hand. It was done with no special skill, just a generalized figure in white wax whose face was my own, cut from the photograph.

"This was in a box a wig had come in," said Deena. "I've heard some pretty weird stories about your late neighbor, but now I don't think they quite did her justice."

She added, "There's something funny about the wax. It doesn't smell like wax."

I thanked her and we chatted for a few minutes about the various hobbies of the late unlamented.

"Do you think she's gone for good?" Deena asked.

"Yes, I think so. I really don't believe in the dead coming back. It's the living who cause all the trouble in the world."

She sighed. "Well, I hope you're right. I still have to show this goddamn place. It's my job."

"Don't ever go in there at night," I told her. "There's been a prowler and what I've seen of him, he's pretty strange."

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"Oh, Christ."

I walked home with my stick rapping the concrete and the photos and the wax man in my pocket. Angela was ready to move to Alaska when I showed the trophies to her.

"Why," she demanded rhetorically, "did I ever leave lovely Newark to live in this nut-house of a city?"

"It's got a warm climate. Look, I want you to take this doll and lock it up in your safe deposit box. Now, before the bank closes. I don't know whether I'd die if something happened to it, but I don't want to find out."

After my exercise I felt deeply, almost deliciously tired. When Angela had gone I lay down again on the couch and took a little nap, and during it something odd and encouraging happened. I began having deep warm dreams, of my mother, of sleeping at her breast, of hearing my father laugh. Then the old subconscious did a fast forward: I was twenty-five again, drinking red wine and eating goat cheese with olives and looking out from an Italian terrace over the blue Adriatic.

Maybe dreams have healing powers, I thought, or maybe healing expresses itself in dreams. I woke feeling much less stiff and when Angela returned we took a fairly long stroll — to Audubon Park and back — leaving my cane at home. Angela commented on my relative boyishness.

"My bones are knitting," I said happily. "I can hear them snapping together."

"You are *so* full of it," she said, but in fact that night I was a more energetic bed partner than she'd been accustomed to.

Haunts or no haunts, men of wax, dead witches, whatever, nature was bringing me into that sweet state of recovery when every hour gives a sense of growing strength, of youth recaptured.

Next day I napped again while Angela was out shopping. I woke feeling even better. In the afternoon she put on her power-walking togs and I accompanied her partway around the track in the park before turning back for still more sleep and recovery.

Dinner was a feast. We went to Sbisa's and ate ourselves silly. The French Quarter after dark was everything I love and hate about New Orleans, sleaze and beauty, horrendous traffic and music bursting out of every crack in the old stuccoed walls. While a brief furious rain fell, we

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drank brandy at the Napoleon House and smiled at each other across a flickering candle.

"Did you know," she asked, "there was a witch in my family? My grandmother Nonna called her *'strega nostra,'* our witch."

"Was she burned?"

"No, on the contrary, she lived to a hundred and three. She was a healer, and she must have been good at it, considering how long she lasted."

"This was in Newark?"

"No, in Cittavecchia. I don't think it's possible to live to a hundred and three in Newark. Or, for that matter, desirable."

I suppose I was feeling too good to see the implications of all this. Physical comfort makes you dense. Back at home, I made love like a young man and slept like a baby.

It was a good thing I did, for at two-twenty in the morning the telephone began tinkling away. With Angela simulating coma, I had to stumble across the room into the hall and pick it up.

"Hello and good morning," said Bessie's whiskey-and-cigarettes voice.

"Yeah," I muttered.

"Hell of a time to call you and Adrian didn't want to," she said, "but if you could just come over for a minute — "

I was pretty well awake by now. "What's happened?"

"Stopgap caught the guy next door coming in the window and tore off his big toe. Adrian thinks we should call a lawyer, but I said call you."

So there I was, getting dressed in the dark, putting buttons in the wrong holes and donning socks inside out. The Toups house was brightly lit, as I had expected. Bessie wore a flowered nightgown, Adrian was barefooted in pants, braces, and a tanktop. As usual, Stopgap had to be prevented from attacking my ankles and Bessie held him in her arms while we all solemnly viewed the object lying on their dining room table.

It was undoubtedly a big toe — of a sort. It had no nail. It was dead white and yielded no blood, though a little pale fluid resembling lymph leaked out of the torn end. Made of wax? Perhaps, I thought, originally. But it had changed. Prodding the toe with a knife Bessie brought me, I thought the stuff it was made of had more tensile strength than wax and there was a faintly nasty organic smell about it.

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"I heard somebody fumbling at the window and grabbed my .38 snub," explained Adrian. "Came in the dining room, and this character was working his way between the bars. Well, Stopgap came in with me and while I was still deciding if it was legal to shoot the bastard where he was or if I had to wait for him to come all the way in, the dog went at him."

"What did the burglar do?"

"Squeaked and run."

Bessie put Stopgap down and he rampaged around and peed on the furniture to let the next intruder know whose territory this was.

"Who is this guy, anyway?" Bessie demanded.

"I don't know," I told her. "But I'd like to."

I repeated this to Angela at breakfast, over coffee. Bessie had sealed the toe in a plastic sandwich bag that now reposed in my freezer next to the orange juice.

"All I can figure is he hasn't found what he's looking for in the DeSaye house, so he's beginning to roam the neighborhood."

"Oh, nice. A zombie's just what we need around here."

I tried to explain that he looked weak, clumsy, stupid, soft.

Angela wasn't paying attention.

"First a witch, now a fucking zombie," was her response. She rarely said the F-word, so I knew she was agitated.

Returning strength inclined me to do something about the intruder. I figured that if Stopgap could handle him, I could too. So I waited until Angela was out and then called Deena and set forth, carrying my heaviest stick.

Deena met me at the DeSaye house and asked if I really wanted to go in. I said yes.

"Well, I've got a job to do. Lock up when you leave."

She gave me the key and I stepped inside, closed the door behind me and was alone, or perhaps not quite.

Dust had sifted in, as it will into the best-kept house. The sense of emptiness remained but I knew the intruder had been here. The sun slanted under roller blinds and penetrated starched lace curtains and struck the floor at such an angle that I had no difficulty in seeing his smooth, unlined footprints in the dust.

I had long ago learned how to toss a room, as they say. I worked my

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way through the house fairly quickly, opening and shutting drawers, turning pictures, pulling out furniture, prodding sofas and chairs, and so forth. My cane was a nuisance, but I kept it close at hand throughout the process. I found nothing of interest downstairs.

Upstairs in the bedroom was a closet full of Mrs. DeSaye's husband's clothes, all neatly pressed. He had favored double-breasted white suits with lapels six inches wide, a collection of ties that could have been used as warning signals, and stiff white shirts with great wing collars. A fashion plate, circa 1948.

Then, on a shelf of apparently unread Great Books, I found a scrapbook. Fancy cover, brittle gray pages, brownish snapshots. A young Mrs. DeSaye wearing a long bob and shoulders. Her eyes bulged as they had later; she leaned toward the lens and did not smile; her gaze was so direct that the eyes seemed to follow me. A woman of power, even when young.

Then something that amazed me: snapshots showing her with the matinee idol whose pinup I'd seen earlier. They posed by a flashy Buick, by a large stucco house, by a gushing fountain. He held her hand, she demurely took his arm. "*The Next Clark Gable*?!" queried a page torn from a movie magazine of the time, with another picture of the familiar jutting-jawed face. The breathless text identified the coming star as Desmond DeSaye. "While bringing the romantic charm of old New Orleans to the silver screen, handsome young Desmond DeSaye sets a high moral tone in scandal-rocked Hollywood by his devotion to his lovely wife Sonia."

Following this quaint b.s. was a list of screen credits. Mentioned were all the VCR tapes in the sitting room. I suspected you'd have to look closely at any of the movies to spot him, for even the magazine admitted that he was "still awaiting his First Big Break."

The book also contained half a dozen obituary notices glued to the back pages. At first I couldn't see why — just an array of accident cases and one or two suicides. Then I noticed that all the victims had been connected in one way or another with the movie industry. Mrs. DeSaye, I now felt certain, had been advancing her husband's career. Perhaps this was how she had started her own remarkable career — with a little connubial killing.

Finally, there was Desmond DeSaye's own obit from the L.A. *Times:*

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a masterpiece of obfuscation which nevertheless hinted that a drug overdose might have had something to do with his death at twenty-eight. He had been cremated, and his ashes interred in a moving Christian service in a niche at Forest Lawn. At the conclusion of the sermon by a famous female evangelist, a white dove had been released, symbolizing the soul of the departed.

I closed the scrapbook in a thoughtful mood.

A few minutes after four I reached Mrs. DeSaye's sitting room. For a time I poked around aimlessly. It was noticeably neater-looking than before, but Deena's housework had consisted mainly in throwing everything into the already overfull closet and slamming the door. I began pulling things out and the musty smell of uncleaned cloth billowed around me, making me sneeze. I found nothing but the same old clutter; the wigs were just wigs; the novels held no secrets pressed between their pages. I didn't play the tapes.

That left Queen Victoria's bathroom. The diffused light still prevailed, the waxy leavings, the peculiar smell. I now had at least a general idea of what the tub had been used for, but very few things in the world are as empty as an empty bathtub, so I moved on with my researches. The toilet tank contained only the usual floats and valves, plus a garden of multicolored algae. Nothing remained except the big suitcase, which had been dragged along the wall and upended.

I set it flat on the floor. The product of a more opulent age of travel, it was nearly four feet long and a foot thick — red leather carefully maintained with saddle soap. It wasn't very heavy, yet felt somehow full — packed, you know. I have absolute contempt for suitcase locks; I went hunting through Mrs. DeSaye's cooking and eating utensils, found a fork, bent one tine, and proceeded to snap both locks open in two minutes flat.

Jackpot. The suitcase was full of packages wrapped in green satin, and each package contained one or more human bones.

The bones were white and polished, almost elegant. The pelvic angle indicated a male. The skull had been separated from the mandible and both were filled with clean white teeth, carefully capped. I felt pretty sure that the next Clark Gable lay before me — the more lasting part of him, anyway.

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I was wondering idly whose ashes now reposed in the Desmond DeSaye niche in the columbarium at Forest Lawn when a very soft sound caused me to turn. A pale, supple something glided into the room and came at me.

There's a time for thinking and a time for reflexes. I dropped the skull, seized my cane, took a batter's grip and made it whistle as I hit him across the middle. He squeaked and bent so far over the cane that he seemed to wrap around it, his upper parts fusing briefly to his lower body. I jerked it free and smacked him again across his face, which was featureless except for a shapeless sort of mouth. He shrank back, keening; I felt ashamed of myself, as if I'd been beating a cripple.

He started forward again, cringing from the blow he expected but coming on anyway. I stepped back and suddenly realized that I meant nothing to him. He sank down on the floor by the scattered bones and began to gather them up and thrust them one by one into his lank, pasty body.

It was fascinating to watch. He flowed around the bones, coating and then absorbing them as if they were falling into an oily, thick white stew. He seemed to know by instinct where they went, and so translucent was his waxy flesh that I could see their shadows move inside him. Twisting fluidly, like a snail climbing its own shell, he drove the twenty-six bones of the vertebral column into his back. He pressed the still articulated pelvis into his belly and it sank through him until it met the spine. He took up the long, elegant femurs and drove them into his thighs like a fakir inserting nails. He searched frantically through a clutter of little bones for the five metacarpals and fourteen phalanges of his left hand and his still pliant right inserted them as neatly as the pieces of a Chinese puzzle.

The last was the head; he first drove in the lower jaw and for a moment sat working it like someone just released by the dentist. Then he raised the skull, rattling with the tiny ossicles of the ears like a gourd full of pebbles and pressed it into his lump of a head, and the white stuff flowed around the bone and absorbed it and took shape from it.

He turned and looked at me, and I saw the limits of the magic that had remade him: he had no eyes, only a statue-like blankness in the sockets; he had no thin line of mustache, no beard, no hair. His nose and ears were formless.

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Yet Desmond DeSaye was becoming recognizable. The bones gave him shape. He drew his lips back from the gleaming teeth in what might have been a grin or a snarl but was probably only a kind of exercise, feeling the new interconnection of flesh, bone and ivory. He put out a white tongue and licked his lips, spreading a little pale shiny fluid as he did. In the diffused glare of the window the absolute whiteness of him — of everything about him, flesh, bone, blood, teeth, even his spit — looked unutterably strange.

Yet he seemed perfectly harmless, now that he had found what he was looking for. I felt embarrassed by his nakedness, so I went into the bedroom closet and brought him one of his suits and helped him put it on. He was submissive but clumsy, as if the feel and very idea of cloth was strange to him. The fit was perfect.

By this time I thought I had figured him out, generically at least. He was not a human nor even a zombie, but a kind of golem. He seemed to have no will of his own, now that the commands embedded in his waxy flesh had been obeyed. Surely, I thought, he could only have been intended for a slave.

How confused he must have been when Mrs. DeSaye failed to come home that night, and he emerged from the tub where the ersatz flesh (or should I be more elegant and call it faux flesh?) had taken form. I imagined him venturing blindly into an incomprehensible world, knowing only that he had to find *something* to make him complete. A gelatinous man, probably able to compress himself into a corner under the house when the police were shining lights and tramping around, searching for a prowler.

I led him into the next room and sat him down on the battered chaise longue. Dressed in the ancient suit, he looked like a cheap department store dummy, white and bald and blind. He was carrying small objects in one hand, and now began to play with them. They were two tiny bones, the phalanges of his left big toe. Until I fetched the toe from my freezer, he would have no place to put them.

I left the house, carefully locking the door behind me. I didn't think he would have any reason to go prowling now, and with the hard bones inside him he would creep between no more bars. I had no feeling about him at all; fear was gone and he wasn't human enough to pity. I had

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absolutely no idea what to do with him, and I was arrogant enough to think that the question was up to me.

NGELA WAS ENTHRALLED and horrified by my account of Mrs. DeSaye's invention.

"Talk about carrying the torch," she said. "All those years! Trucking the bones around, looking for a way to reanimate them."

"I doubt if romance had much to do with it," I objected.

"Romance had everything to do with it. Think of her novels, her tapes. All those cosmetics. The blonde wigs. The lady longed for love."

"With that?"

"Certainly. He'd look somewhat like the original. Anyway, when you've been married to an actor I imagine a golem might be a pretty good substitute. No ego, no chatter, and no drugs."

It was true, I reflected, that the creature was anatomically complete. That didn't mean it was functional.

Tomorrow, I thought, I would call a friend of mine at Ochsner Foundation Hospital and turn over to him something that would be of interest to science. Perhaps it might even upset a few preconceived ideas. Maybe the boys in the labs could learn something useful.

I did not think the golem would last long. It seemed to have no way to take nourishment and I thought it would gradually weaken and die, like one of those insects that are born without digestive systems. I told Angela this.

"Aren't things like that born just to mate?" she asked pointedly.

Next morning she trotted off to the bank to do some sort of business. I called my friend the M.D. and threw out enough vague but enticing hints to make him promise to drop by and see me between lunch and his usual golf date that afternoon.

I decided to bring the golem his toe, to have him complete for his first medical checkup. It was when I was taking the chilly plastic package out of the freezer, my mind running on the astonishing creative power it represented, that thoughts of my own rapid recovery suddenly set my brain in a whirl. All at once I was remembering Angela's talk of witches in her family during that happy night in the French Quarter.

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Like danger, intuition demands action. I phoned the bank where she did her business and asked to speak to her.

"Mrs. Barberino is in the vault looking at her safe deposit box," I explained.

When she came on the line I said, "I'm glad it's working, Angela, and I don't care why."

"Then you shouldn't interrupt me," she said. "I've been giving this goddamn wax man an hour's treatment of healing thoughts a day and it's really kind of hypnotic. Staring at him I see you, isn't that weird? I can even smell you — your sweat, that stuff you put on to try to keep your hair. Do you suppose it's something in the wax, or is it just me? It's like a hallucination, only it's not, it's real. Does that make any sense?"

"No," I said, "but keep at it, *strega mia*." And rang off.

I walked into the garden and saw magic everywhere. Birds were quarreling and their bright scattered voices were the sounds of the dappled sunlight quivering among the leaves. The mealy earth had the exact smell of a particular day in my childhood that suddenly returned to me with visionary clarity. Everything echoed everything else and the sky exhaled a damp soft breath over the earth.

I set out cheerfully for Mrs. DeSaye's, patting Foo Manchu as I passed and carefully locking the gate behind me. I started to whistle; then the sound died on my lips. A car I recognized was standing in front of the DeSaye place.

Damn, damn, damn, I thought, Deena's got another set of keys. Knowing what she would find, I broke into a run.

The front door stood open. I stepped inside and paused, panting, eyes too dazzled to see. I heard confused sounds, which alarmed me. Deena had always seemed a bit fragile under her brittle surface, and I expected to find her paralyzed with astonishment or fear. Perhaps in a faint.

I blinked and my eyes cleared and beheld a rape tableau.

Deena was bent backwards across an overstuffed chair, shoes lost and skirt torn, and the bald suited creature was leaning over her. He had one hand gripping her throat, silencing her, and the other was tearing roughly at her clothing.

Suddenly I had a vision of what Desmond DeSaye was like in life — not a pretty boy of the silver screen, but a stallion bridled by a witch.

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I snatched up the gleaming brass poker from the white fireplace and cracked him hard across the shoulderblades. That got his attention. Keeping his left hand on Deena's throat, he straightened and turned his head.

Lord, but he had changed overnight. His eyes now were dark spots under a waxy film, primordial eyes, light-sensitive spots that would become eyes in time. For the first time I realized that the bones were not there only to give him shape. They held a treasury of DNA, the perfect memory of what he had been. Desmond DeSaye was in process of being reinvented — the fundamental beast, that is, minus everything he might have learned in his first life.

He stared, not seeing anything but the glare of the open door behind me. He was wondering where the sudden blow had come from. Then I moved and he instantly dropped Deena and spun around. Eyes still primitive, I thought; ears working well. Too well. Even the external ears had unfolded, whorled like opening leaves.

I brought out the icy plastic envelope with his toe in it and flung it at his face and he snatched it and began to tear the envelope apart. He sniffed the toe — another sense he had working — and then drew the little bones from his pocket and began pressing them into the flesh.

Meanwhile Deena slipped away, hands pressed to her throat over the harsh red marks of his fingers, her chic elegance reduced to a smear of tears. When she looked a question at me I gave her no more than a nod, unwilling to make a gesture that he might hear. In stocking feet she moved to a window and began to open it. Instantly DeSaye turned his head. When he did, she screamed.

He started up and I hit him again, bringing him swiveling back toward me. I spared Deena one more glance, saw her climbing through the window, saw beyond her the bulk of Adrian Toups emerging from his house with Bessie behind him. Minute but furious barking accompanied them. Reinforcements, I thought.

I'd need them. DeSaye shoved the toe into his pocket and came at me. He seemed powerful, smooth, and he moved so quick I think he might have grappled with me then, except that he stumbled — he really needed that toe for balance.

I swung again and gave him a smart crack on the side of the head. It

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was a solid meeting of brass and bone and anything merely human would have folded under it. But the once and future Desmond DeSaye was governed by other laws.

He recovered himself — I was halfway through the door by then — and sprang after me with a hair-raising howl. He came so fast I didn't have room to swing again; I jabbed the poker into his face and he seized it and flung it aside. I turned and ran, and as I pounded through the gate I heard a metallic clang as the poker landed somewhere inside.

I ran gasping down the hot and sunny sidewalk of Azalea Place, where I had been accustomed to hobble, saunter, stroll. As I passed the Toups' place, I saw that Adrian had reached his front fence and that Bessie was hugging Deena. Through the corner of my eye I saw the fat man raise his .38 snub and a shot exploded behind me and set echoes careening off the housefronts.

I spared one more glance back and saw no damage to my pursuer whatever. Goddamn it, Adrian, I was thinking, why have a gun if you don't know how to shoot?

I made it up the drive as far as my own gate. Locked, of course. I was fumbling with the keys when DeSaye arrived and grabbed my shoulder in a crushing grip. I let his own impetus spin us around and gave him an elbow as deeply as I could into his belly. My elbow sank in and there was no feeling of recovery, no springiness in his body — the elbow stayed in him until I jerked it out.

Yet he felt pain, I had seen that many times already, and I left him thrashing around beside the fence while I forced an unwilling key into the lock and threw the gate open. Then he was up and after me again.

Very good, I thought, and though my lungs were heaving and half my body seemed on fire, I held the gate open for him. Welcome, you sonofabitch, I thought. He came through howling, and I fell back against the bars, slamming the gate shut and holding it to keep myself upright.

Meanwhile DeSaye had discovered his mistake. Starting forward in a low rush like a charging lion, Foo Manchu seized him by one thigh and dragged him thrashing and squeaking with pain into the shadow of the cape jasmine. I would no more have interfered with what followed than I would have tried to stop a thunderstorm. Not that it was pleasant to watch. In spite of a tolerably rough life, I don't think I ever really

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understood the meaning of savagery until I watched the second death of Desmond DeSaye.

The lion-dog first pinned him to the earth, tore off his head, crushed it between massive jaws and swallowed it whole. Then he dismembered the inert body, swallowed the limbs, and consumed the torso after raking it apart with his claws. The sounds were industrial — the grinding, crunching and snapping of one methodical machine breaking down another. Throughout, white flowers of honeyed sweetness rained down on slayer and slain.

By then the whole garden was sprayed with pale malodorous fluid and scattered with rags of cloth. For one heart-stopping moment my familiar turned on me with nostrils flaring, smelling his enemy's blood on me. Then he recognized me and retreated. He sat down in the shadow of the jasmine, and gradually froze into immobility again. Still I heard from his belly a dull borborygmus, like the work of miners underground, where the work of destruction continued.

At some point in the festivities Adrian arrived outside the gate, puffing, and I think asked me if I was all right. I have no idea what I answered. He couldn't see what was going on, but he must have heard the noises. What he thought about it all I've no idea, but he backed me up loyally a quarter of an hour later, when the police arrived in answer to a complaint about a shot being fired.

We claimed that a prowler attempting rape had been interrupted by my arrival, had pursued me but had been frightened away by Adrian's gun. I gave them a generic description, later endorsed by Deena. I said, and she agreed, that her assailant had been a bald white man in a double-breasted suit. That much was true.

Angela came home to find the neighborhood in an uproar. Then, when the excitement was seemingly over, I began to suffer from chest pains and had to be taken to the hospital for what was diagnosed as mild angina secondary to cardiac insufficiency. I was released next day with medical orders against smoking (which I have never done) and drinking (which I did not intend to stop).

In fact, a few days later Angela and I invited the Toupses and Deena over to help us drink a few bottles of old wine, in celebration of the final exorcism of Azalea Place. I remember very little of the party except that

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it was happy and somewhat silly. As our neighbors came through the gate, Stopgap began growling at Foo Manchu, and Adrian picked up his little dog and muttered, "Stay in your own league, fella."

WITCHCRAFT was gone. Except, of course, for *strega mia*. During our time of troubles my witch had tried out powers she never knew she possessed, and when the troubles were over the consciousness of power remained.

Now when we quarrel (as we do from time to time; the honeymoon's over and we have become that common oddity of our times, the long-unmarried couple) she smilingly recalls to my memory the wax doll she keeps in her bank box. I know that I depend for my continued recovery and health on the treatments she gives me through it, as well as on the ordinary treatment embraced in what has become a warm and satisfactory relationship.

Hence I let her have her way in most things. Love is nice, I think, watching my Angela, but I have always respected power, too. Power is what the witches seek, and I'm glad it has come to rest at last in loving hands.

"What cotton candy? That's fiberglass insulation."

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

The Barbed Coil, by J.V. Jones, Warner Books, 1997, $22.

LIKE ANYONE else, I have my biases when it comes to what I read. For instance, high fantasy — those tales of derring-do set in a mock-medieval, secondary world — isn't high on my list of must-reads. However, by agreeing to write this column, I feel it's only fair to give everything at least a cursory look, and tend to read the first couple of pages of most of the books that show up in my P.O. box.

Usually, my attention drifts, or I get irritated with the flimsy characterization, same-old, same-old plot, or the poor writing (too often, all three at once), and the book gets quickly set aside. But sometimes I'm pleasantly surprised. I'll look up to find that a half hour has gone by and I'm fifty pages or so into some book that, from the accompanying promotional material, I wasn't expecting to like.

J.V. Jones's *The Barbed Coil* is one of those. There's not a whole lot new in the idea of a struggle between an evil empire and the gentler nations on its borders, nor in the magical talisman that must be destroyed if the forces of good are to prevail. The cast includes a true heir to a throne who is unaware of his lineage, a rather dangerous rogue with a good heart, and of course, the innocent protagonist through whom the reader can vicariously explore the new world laid out on the novel's pages.

But Jones manages to keep events moving and the plot elements fresh all the same. Her heroine, Tessa McCamfrey, comes from our world, and suffers from tinnitus — a ringing in the ears that can become so pronounced one is left physically incapacitated. So it makes sense that when Tessa arrives in another world and finds her tinnitus has vanished, she's rather happy to be there, never mind the

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dangers. Jones has also set up a fascinating magic system based upon intricately designed and painted patterns reminiscent of Celtic ribbonwork and illuminated manuscripts.

It's touches such as these, together with the clean writing and crisp dialogue, that carry one through her use of some of the more tired tropes of the genre. And also, happily, Jones begins and finishes her story in one volume without sacrificing either detail or scope.

Winter Tides, by James P. Blaylock, Ace Books, 1997, $21.95.

Fifteen years before the main action of the book takes place, *Winter Tides* opens with surfer Dave Quinn trying to rescue a pair of twelve-year-old twins caught in a sudden undertow in Huntington Beach. He manages to save Anne, but when he returns to the water for her sister Elinor, the undertow proves to be too strong and she's pulled from his grasp.

Fast forward to the present where Quinn, still carrying the guilt of the girl's death, is now working as a carpenter for an eccentric theater owner known as the Earl. When Quinn meets the new Canadian artist that the Earl has hired to work on the sets with him, it takes a little while for the artist Anne and Quinn to realize that they share a piece of history — she's the surviving twin. But the tentative first steps toward a more romantic relationship that the two would like to explore quickly get complicated as the past rises up to interfere, entangling them in unfinished business.

They're both haunted by the ghost of Anne's sister Elinor, but for Anne, the haunting is literal. They're both also targeted by the Earl's miscreant son Edmund.

The enmity between Quinn and Edmund is longstanding, intensifying when Quinn discovers that Edmund is stealing from the Earl and harassing Anne. Edmund is caught up in a delusion that Anne is the personification of his artistic muse, the one person with whom he can share his penchant for filming sexual perversions and his growing fascination with violence. Teaming up with Elinor's ghost, his sociopathic tendencies soon overtake the thin veneer of civilized amiability he's hidden behind for years.

Blaylock had long been the master of the quirky character and a convoluted plot. The charm of his slightly skewed stories, and the whimsical people inhabiting them, has been his ability to utilize their

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improbability to reveal common truths, or at least views — of the world, of our place in it — that we might not otherwise have focused upon without his direction.

In *Winter Tides* these trademark elements can still be found, but they're subdued, taking a back seat to Blaylock's more serious exploration of darker characters such as Edmund and — because, mostly, we only know her through Anne's memories — to a lesser extent, Elinor. Blaylock's prose is different here as well: more approachable to those not quite so attuned to his earlier work; spare, at times, but also fluidly descriptive. There are moments in the text, particularly in how he brings to life both natural landscapes and the more decayed urban cityscapes, that are pure poetry.

In other words, Blaylock is proving to be a writer unafraid of change — one willing to explore beyond the stylistic terrain that he has already so ably claimed as his own in previous work. In some ways I miss the old voice — but I can always go back and reread those earlier books. Mostly I'm delighted to follow his growth and look forward to seeing just where he'll take us next.

Voodoo Child, by Michael Reaves, Tor Books, 1998, $24.95.

Readers with long memories might remember *Dragonworld* (1979), *Street Magic* (1991) and the more recent *Night Hunter* (1995) — all markedly different sorts of novels, yet penned by the same man: Michael Reaves. If we have Hollywood to blame that there aren't more of his novels (he spends most of his time writing screenplays), the ones we do get are worth the wait.

This time out he takes us to New Orleans for a novel that's part contemporary fantasy, part horror, part character study. The bare bones of the plot concern the struggle between two Haitian Voudoun *houngan* — Shane LaFitte, a priest dedicated to easing the hardship and poverty of the people of Veronique, and Jorge Arnez, later known as Mal Sangre, who becomes a New Orleans crimelord in his quest to delve deeper into the forbidden Voudoun otherworld than any man has dared to do before.

While the enmity between the two men certainly drives the novel, it's the rich cast of characters caught up in their struggle that make the novel so fascinating: a parole officer, an ex-hooker, a trumpeter in a jazz band, a doctor in the city's busiest ER, and others.

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Reaves's scriptwriting background shows up in the quick cuts between points of view and the rather large cast. One might almost think the novel a treatment for an unproduced film except the characterization is richer, the background and history more fully realized, than one has come to expect from Hollywood. A film would concentrate on the struggle between LaFitte and Mal Sangre, with the other characters playing bit parts. Reaves's novel utilizes its cast to define that same conflict in terms that are more human than supernatural, tearing at the border between magic and mundane, and raising the everyday struggles we all face to dramatic proportions.

So while there's violence and dread in the pages of *Voodoo Child*, there is also compassion and understanding. Darkness exists, but here it exaggerates both its own shadows and the light that drives it back.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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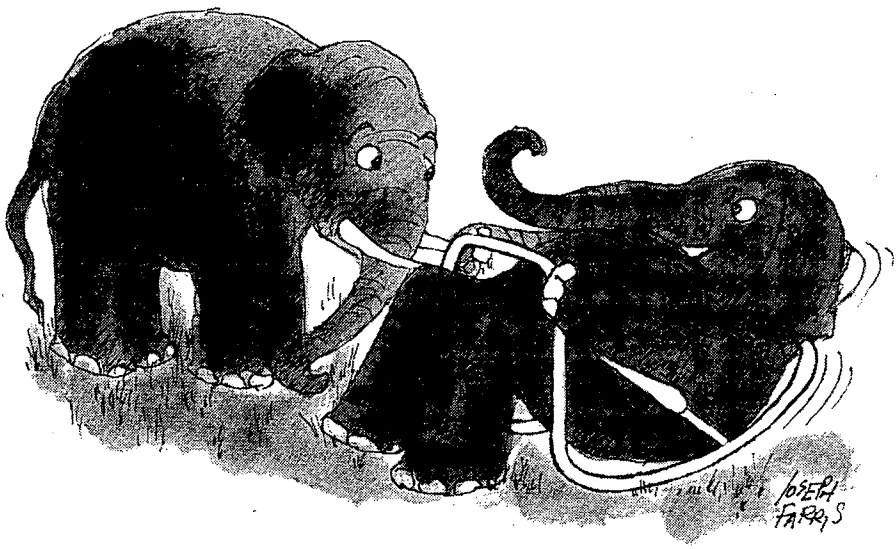

"I'm working on my abs."

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MUSING ON BOOKS

MICHELLE WEST

The Sparrow, by Mary Doria Russell, Fawcett, 1997, $12.

Prince of Dogs, by Kate Elliott, DAW, 1998, $23.95.

Maskerade, by Terry Pratchett, HarperPrism, 1997, $22.

MY EDITOR has never handed me a book and told me I had to review it. This column, and its contents, are almost entirely a reflection of my tastes. Not long ago, however, a book came in the mail from the editor with a very short message attached: I think you'll find it interesting. As he'd never done this before, I was deeply curious, and I read the first page. One thing led to another.

That book was *The Sparrow,* by Mary Doria Russell.

He was right. I did, and do, find it interesting; I've been thinking about it — as a novel, as a philosophical rumination, as a very affectionate exploration of human need — non-stop since I turned the last page, which always marks a particular kind of good book for me.

First, let me say that this is a first novel. It was published by Villard in hardcover, and I missed it entirely in that incarnation; this is my introduction to Russell's work. Second, I would never in a million years have said that it was a first novel; even those things that I feel ambivalent about are things that have the distinct feel of authorial choice and not authorial floundering, of which most first authors — myself, sadly, included — are guilty. Third, it is without question science fiction, although in fact the future Earth of Russell's tale is given a spare glance; if there are political changes, social changes, technological upheavals, they exist in limbo, hinted at — because, of course, in order to tell the story one must assume space travel that's energy efficient and fast — but never brought to the fore. Russell cares about people; she does nothing to distract from them.

From the outset, we know al-

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most every fact that we're going to know, stripped of intent and meaning, except for what we bring to them. Father Emilio Sandoz is a broken man with crippled hands and a body that's barely survived the solitary journey back from the planet Rakhat. Discovered in a brothel by the second party to make that journey, his first act is to kill a child — the child, in fact, that led the humans to him.

We know this. We know that he is the sole survivor of the Jesuit/gentile expedition to Rakhat. And we know that he is a broken man; that he is bitterly angry, that he is terribly afraid, and that he is unwilling to unman himself further by exposing the ugliness with which he wrestles.

This is his story.

Employing a parallel narrative line, Russell starts in the present and then switches tracks to the past, dancing between them, showing us Father Emilio Sandoz at his height and at the worst point in his life. There seems to be nothing at all in common between these two men, the one isolated in spite of the friendship and support he's offered, the other involved with people that I fell in love with almost immediately. Anne is a student of the brilliant linguist — for that's what Emilio is; she brings him home one night, introduces him to her husband of many years, and *makes* a home for him. She's a mother/sister figure with a great deal of warmth and compassion, and probably the character in the book that I don't believe could be written by an author who didn't possess some measure of the same characteristics. When Emilio Sandoz returns to the ghettos of La Perla, which birthed him, and from which he was plucked and saved, he calls Anne and George to join him in a worthy endeavor, and in the end, they do. There they meet Jimmy, a young astronomer, and Sofia the vulture, whose job it is to learn everything that he does at work and then automate it all with an AI, thus effectively replacing him. Indentured for half of her life, she was also rescued from a post-wartime ghetto and educated, but not by the Jesuits, and this job just *might* mean her freedom.

Their lives are changed the night that Jimmy's SETI watch produces unearthly — literally — music; an alien symphony from a distant planet. He calls Anne, George, Emilio, and Sofia, brings them to the lab. It is the beginning of the journey to Rakhat.

At any point where revelation about the fate of a character might

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be too painful, we're exposed to the distant fact of it, the history, so that we can prepare; the only exception is Sandoz himself; after all, it's his book. His damnation, his salvation, his belief in God.

Russell has as sure a grip of character as I've seen in a long while — and better, a deep affection for humanity, an understanding of its foibles and flaws, an unjudgmental, uncritical eye. She understands the awkward ways that some of us offer kindness, the ways that we break down our walls if we choose to accept such an offer, and the awkward way that some of us accept it. She is unstintingly gentle.

And yet, and of course, there's a strength beneath it all, because for Emilio Sandoz to become even a shadow of what he was before his incomprehensible tragedy, he has to finish the walk through fire, and he has to do it publicly; to confess, to be forgiven, to have done.

The only thing that diluted the effect of Russell's very powerful writing was the inclusion of the alien point of view. Everything about this book is human: the need for belief, the need for faith, the magic and mystery of it — and the tragedy of its loss. The alien viewpoint, while serving a structural role in that the reader can begin to piece together how things went wrong before the confession itself is finally made, is otherwise too distancing; it explains the alien and the alien's decisions — but the book would have been as strong without that, in my opinion, and left the alien as unknowable — alien, in fact.

On the other hand, perhaps that's why Russell chose to expand that viewpoint; to make the *only* unknowable God's will, God's silence.

It doesn't matter. This is powerful, astonishing writing, but it's *also* clear as a bell; approachable, accessible, and heartfelt. If you are a reader who finds literary packaging daunting, ignore the packaging; this is a book that deserves to be read, and will more than reward the reading.

Most middle books in a series can be accused of flagging, or at least crumpling a bit in the middle — they don't have a clear resolution, because they're essentially "middle chapters," and they don't really have as clear a beginning as a first novel. Kate Elliott has left herself open to no such accusation; if anything, *Prince of Dogs*, the second novel in the *Crown of Stars* series, moves faster and with more furious action than the first novel, *King's Dragon*. Having set up a complex situation

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in the first novel, Elliott made everything accessible by carefully choosing the viewpoint characters, and she continues with those characters in this novel.

If you've read the first novel, you know exactly whom the title of the book refers to, and if you haven't read the first novel, you should probably stop reading this review right now, because it's almost impossible not to give spoilers for the ending of *King's Dragon* (which should be available in paperback if you missed the hardcover). Forewarned? Good.

Sanglant, of course, is alive, and struggling to stay that way. Born of human father — a king who is almost destroyed at premature news of his son's "death" — Sanglant nonetheless is a bastard of non-human blood, whose birth — proof of his father's fertility, which is an important part of the right to rule — has been called into question by many. But it's the blood, ultimately, that will decide his fate in Gent, the newest stronghold of Bloodheart of the Eika. The Eika themselves become more interesting as well; we see more of their culture, more of their birthing, more of their family unit and more of their religion, such as it is. They are distinctly not human, and it shows. One of the Eika — part of the ruling family, but not valued highly enough — is joined to Alain through his dreams, and it is through the auspices of the dreams that both Bloodheart and Alain's new father, Lavastine, prepare for war, for Lavastine — desperate to provide the power necessary to legitimize his bastard progeny in such a way that his rule will never be questioned — is determined to take Gent back from the Eika.

Liath's story also continues, as she faces life as an Eagle — an Eagle rather too close to the circle that Sapienta occupies. Sapienta isn't the problem; Hugh is. He is the father of the child that will prove Sapienta's fertility, and her fitness to rule. He is also determined to own Liath; in fact, certain that he already does. Liath herself seems to freeze like a rabbit in headlights whenever Hugh is around her; there's always the spider and the fly feel to their interaction.

But Liath's story, Sanglant's story, and Alain's story come together almost perfectly in Gent, and Alain begins to come into his own, but with typical Alain modesty, misses this fact. You can almost hear the political wheels grind to a start in the epilogue — and you can probably begin to take bets as to who gets crushed by them.

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The most impressive thing about Elliott's well-thought-out, well-structured, and well-crafted fantasy is its sense of historicity. There's a bone-deep reality to the world that informs its people in both the small details and the large. Elliott has a strong ability to create a sense of other that is nonetheless human and compelling; her writing is one of the best arguments for the value of multivolume works.

And that leaves us with the last of this month's books: *Maskerade*, by Terry Pratchett. If you've seen the cover, you know who's on the hot seat in this one. If you haven't, I won't tease: It's a white half-mask, much like the ones that have been in advertisements for at least six years now (*Phantom* aficionados can probably tell you exactly how many years it's been). I would have liked to see it against the full black background, but I imagine that would have been too misleading.

Pratchett takes the, ummm, plot of *Phantom of the Opera* and turns it on its head. There is the New Owner (a cheese maker, and a darned good businessman at that), the Opera House Ghost, the Reserved Box, the Mysterious letters with too much punctuation, the Murders, and the young ingenue Christine. There's also a rather large male lead, Henry Slugg (stage name: Enrico Basilica, although in Opera almost all of life seems to be a stage), a very irritated Diva and, well, a voice double.

Because, sadly, Christine can't sing.

That voice double is Perdita X Nitt, born Agnes Nitt, a girl who, well, has a really nice personality and good hair. She knows that Nanny Ogg has been looking at her a little too closely, and the truth of the matter is she doesn't *want* to be a witch, she wants to be a young woman for whom all choices are options. But with her particular looks and her particular start in life and her particular leanings, she's got witch makings, and Nanny Ogg and Granny Weatherwax could certainly use a third witch.

The Watch put in a brief appearance (well, all right, Nobby Nobbs and Detritus do), which add to the pandemonium as the mystery gets solved.

I like the witches a great deal, but I like all of Discworld, so I suppose that's not saying much. Pratchett plays with the idea of masks, and this book is perhaps a little more cynical than some of the other Discworld novels, but it's still well worth plunking down the $22 and adding to the read-again library.

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Most of us have come to expect that when the byline "Ben Bova" appears on a work of fiction, that tale will feature clean prose and clear thought; most of his work also views current events in their place within the scope of human history. Such traits certainly appear in his recent novels like Mars *and his latest two,* Moonrise *and* Moonwar *(the latter will be out soon if it hasn't hit the bookstores by the time you read this). They're evident too in this short look at modern politics and near-future technology.*

Remember, Caesar...

By Ben Bova

We have never renounced the use of terror.

— Vladimir Ilyich Lenin

SHE WAS ALONE AND SHE was scared.

Apara Jaheen held her breath as the two plainclothes security guards walked past her. They both held ugly, deadly black machine pistols casually in their hands as they made their rounds along the corridor.

They can't see you, Apara told herself. You're invisible.

Still, she held her breath.

She knew that her stealth suit shimmered ever so slightly in the glareless light from the fluorescents that lined the ceiling of the corridor. You had to be looking for that delicate little ripple in the air, actively seeking it, to detect it at all. And even then you would think it was merely a trick your eyes played on you, a flicker that was gone before it even registered consciously in your mind.

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And yet Apara froze, motionless, not daring to breathe, until the two men — smelling of cigarettes and after-shave lotion — passed her and were well down the corridor. They were talking about the war, betting that it would be launched before the week was out.

Her stealth suit's surface was honeycombed with microscopic fiber optic vidcams and pixels that were only a couple of molecules thick. The suit hugged Apara's lithe body like a famished lover. Directed by the computer built into her helmet, the vidcams scanned her surroundings and projected the imagery onto the pixels.

It was the closest thing to true invisibility that the Cabal's technology had been able to come up with. So close that, except for the slight unavoidable glitter when the sequin-like pixels caught some stray light, Apara literally disappeared into the background.

Covering her from head to toe, the suit's thermal absorption layer kept her infrared profile vanishingly low and its insulation subskin held back the minuscule electromagnetic fields it generated. The only way they could detect her would be if she stepped into a scanning beam, but the wide-spectrum goggles she wore should reveal them to her in plenty of time to avoid them.

She hoped.

Getting into the president's mansion had been ridiculously easy. As instructed, she had waited until dark before leaving the Cabal's safe house in the miserable slums of the city. Her teammates drove her as close to the presidential mansion as they dared in a dilapidated, nondescript faded blue sedan that would draw no attention. They wished her success as she slipped out of the car, invisible in her stealth suit.

"For the Cause," Ahmed said, almost fiercely, to the empty air where he thought she was.

"For the Cause," Apara repeated, knowing that she might never see him again.

Tingling with apprehension, Apara hurried across the park that fronted the mansion, unseen by the evening strollers and beggars, then climbed onto the trunk of one of the endless stream of limousines that entered the grounds. She passed the perimeter guard posts unnoticed.

She rode on the limo all the way to the mansion's main entrance. While a pair of bemedaled generals got out of the limousine and walked

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crisply past the saluting uniformed guards, Apara melted back into the shadows, away from the lights of the entrance, and took stock of the situation.

The guards at the big, open double doors wore splendid uniforms and shouldered assault rifles. And were accompanied by dogs: two big German shepherds who sat on their haunches, tongues lolling, ears laid back.

Will they smell me if I try to go through the doors? Apara asked herself. Muldoon and his technicians claimed that the insulated stealth suit protected her even from giving off a scent. They were telling the truth, as they knew it, of course. But were they right?

If she were caught, she knew her life would be over. She would simply disappear, a prisoner of their security apparatus. They would use drugs to drain her of every scrap of information she possessed. They would not have to kill her afterward; her mind would be gone by then. Standing in the shadows, invisible yet frightened, she tongued the cyanide capsule lodged between her upper right wisdom tooth and cheek. This is a volunteer mission, Muldoon had told her. You've got to be willing to give your life for the Cause.

Apara was willing, yet the fear still rose in her throat, hot and burning.

Born in the slums of Beirut to a mother who abandoned her and a father she never knew, she had understood from childhood that her life was worthless. Even the name they had given her, Apara, meant literally "born to die."

It was during her teen years, when she had traded her body for life itself, for food and protection against the marauding street gangs who raped and murdered for the thrill of it, that she began to realize that life was pointless, existence was pain, the sooner death took her the sooner she would be safe from all fear.

Then Ahmed entered her life and showed her that there was more to living than waiting for death. Strike back! he told her. If you must give up your life, give it for something worthwhile. Even we who are lost and miserable can accomplish something with our lives. We can change the world!

Ahmed introduced her to the Cabal, and the Cabal became her family, her teacher, her purpose for breathing.

For the first time in her short life, Apara felt worthwhile. The Cabal

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flew her across the ocean, to the United States of America, where she met the pink-faced Irishman who called himself Muldoon and was entrusted with her mission to the White House. And decked in the stealth suit, a cloak of invisibility, just like the magic of old Baghdad in the time of Scheherazade and the Thousand and One Nights.

You can do it, she told herself as she clung to the shadows outside the White House's main entrance. They are all counting on you: Muldoon and his technicians and Ahmed, with his soulful eyes and tender dear hands.

When the next limousine disgorged its passengers, a trio of admirals, Apara sucked in a deep breath and walked in with them, past the guards and the dogs. One of the animals perked up its ears and whined softly as she marched in step behind the admirals, but other than that heart-stopping instant she had no trouble getting inside the White House. The guard shushed the animal, gruffly.

She followed the trio of admirals out to the west wing, and down the stairs to the basement level and a long, narrow corridor. At its end, Apara could see, was a security checkpoint with a metal detector like the kind used at airports, staffed by two women in uniform. Both of them were African-Americans.

She stopped and faded back against the wall as the admirals stepped through the metal detector, one by one. The guards were lax, expecting no trouble. After all, only the president's highest and most trusted advisors were allowed here.

Then the two plainclothes guards walked past her, openly displaying their machine pistols and talking about the impending war.

"You think they're really gonna do it?"

"Don't see why not. Hit 'em before they start some real trouble. Don't wait for the mess to get worse."

"Yeah, I guess so."

They walked down the corridor as far as the checkpoint, chatted briefly with the female guards, then came back, passing Apara again, still talking about the possibility of war.

Apara knew that she could not get through the metal detector without setting off its alarm. The archway-like device was sensitive not only to metals, but sniffed for explosives and x-rayed each person stepping

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through it. She was invisible to human eyes but the x-ray camera would see her clearly.

She waited, hardly breathing, until the next clutch of visitors arrived. Civilians, this time. Steeling herself, Apara followed them up to the checkpoint and waited as they stopped at the detector and handed their wristwatches, coins, and belts to the women on duty, then stepped through the detector, single-file.

Timing was important. As the last of the civilians started through, holding his briefcase in front of his chest, as instructed, Apara dropped flat on her stomach and slithered across the archway like a snake speeding after its prey. Carefully avoiding the man's feet, she got through the detector just before he did.

The x-rays did not reach the floor, she had been told. She hoped it was true.

The alarm buzzer sounded. Apara, on the far side of the detector now, sprang to her feet.

"Hold it, sir," said one of the uniformed guards. "The metal detector went off."

He looked annoyed. "I gave you everything. Don't tell me the damned machine picked up the hinges on my briefcase."

The woman shrugged. "Would you mind stepping through again, sir, please?"

With a huff, the man ducked back through the doorway, still clutching his briefcase, and then stepped through once more. No alarm.

"Satisfied?" he sneered.

"Yes, sir. Thank you," the guard said tonelessly.

"Happens now and then," said her partner as she handed the man back his watch, belt and change. "Beeps for no reason."

"Machines aren't perfect," the man muttered.

"I guess," said the guard.

"Too much iron in your blood, Marty," joked one of the other men.

Apara followed them down the corridor, feeling immensely relieved. As far as her information went, there were no further security checkpoints. Unless she bumped into someone, or her suit somehow failed, she was safe.

Until she tried to get out of the White House. But that wouldn't

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happen until she had fulfilled her mission. If they caught her then, she would simply bite on the cyanide capsule, knowing that she had struck her blow for the Cause.

She followed the civilians into a spacious conference room dominated by a long, polished mahogany table. Most of the high-backed leather chairs were already occupied, mainly by men in military uniforms. There were more stars around the table than in a desert sky, Apara thought. One bomb in here and the U.S. military establishment would be decapitated, along with most of the cabinet heads.

She pressed her back against the bare wall next to the door as the latest arrivals went around the table, shaking hands.

They chatted idly for several minutes, a dozen different conversations buzzing around the long table. Then the president entered from the far door and they all snapped to their feet.

"Sit down, gentlemen," said the president. "And ladies," she added, smiling at the three female cabinet members who sat together at one side of the table.

The president looked older in person than she did on television, Apara thought. She was not wearing so much makeup, of course. Still, the president looked vigorous and determined, her famous green eyes sweeping the table as she took her chair at its head. For an instant those eyes looked directly at Apara, and her heart stopped. But the moment passed. The president could not see Apara any more than the others could.

The president's famous smile was absent as she sat down. Looking directly at the chairman of the joint chiefs, she asked the general, "Well, are we ready?"

"In twenty-four hours," he replied crisply. "Troop deployment is complete, the naval task force is on station and our full complement of planes is on site, ready to go."

"Then why do we need twenty-four hours?" the president demanded.

The general's silver eyebrows rose a centimeter. "Logistics, ma'am. Getting ammunition and fuel to the front-line units, setting our communications codes. Strictly routine, but very important if we want the attack to come off without a hitch."

The president was not pleased. "Every hour we delay means more pressure from the U.N."

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"And from the Europeans," said one of the civilians. Apara recognized him as the secretary of defense.

"The French are complaining again?"

"They've never stopped complaining, madam president. Now they've got the Russians joining the chorus. They've asked for an emergency meeting of NATO."

"Not the general assembly?"

The secretary of defense almost smiled. "No, ma'am. Even the French realize that the U.N. can't stop us."

A murmur of suppressed laughter rippled along the table. Apara felt anger. These people used the United Nations when it suited them, and ignored the U.N. otherwise.

The secretary of state, sitting at her right hand, was a thickset older man with a heavy thatch of gray hair that flopped stubbornly over his forehead. He held up a blunt-fingered hand and the table fell silent.

"I must repeat, madam president," he said in a grave, dolorous voice, "that we have not yet exhausted all our diplomatic and economic options. Military force should be our *last* choice, after all other possibilities have been foreclosed, not our first choice."

"We don't have time for that," snapped the secretary of defense. "And those people don't respect anything but force, anyway."

"I disagree," said state. "Our U.N. ambassador tells me that they are willing to allow the United Nations to arbitrate our differences."

"The United Nations," the president muttered.

"As an honest broker — "

"Yeah, and we'll be the honest brokee," one of the admirals wisecracked. Everyone around the table laughed.

Then the president said, "Our U.N. ambassador is a well-known weak sister. Why do you think I put him there in New York, Carlos, instead of giving him your portfolio?"

The secretary of state was not deterred. "Invading a sovereign nation is a serious decision. American soldiers and aircrew will be killed."

The president glared at him. "All right, Carlos, you've made your point. Now let's get on with it."

One of the admirals said, "We're ready with the nuclear option, if and when it's needed."

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"Good," snapped the president.

And on it went, for more than an hour. The fundamentalist regime of Iran was going to be toppled by American military power. Its infiltration of other Moslem nations would end, its support of international terrorism would be wiped out.

Terrorism, Apara growled silently. They speak of using nuclear weapons and they call the Iranians terrorists.

And what am I? she asked herself. What is the Cabal and the Cause we fight for? What other weapons do we have except terror? How can we struggle for a just world, a world free of domination, unless we use terror? We have no armies, no fleets of ships or planes. Despite the lies their media publish, we have no nuclear weapons and we would not use them if we did.

Apara felt sure of that. The guiding precept of the Cause was to strike at the leaders of oppression and aggression. Why kill harmless women and children? Why strike the innocent? Or even the soldiers who merely carry out the orders of their leaders?

Strike the leaders! Put terror in *their* hearts. That was the strategy of the Cabal, the goal of the Cause.

Brave talk, Apara thought. Tonight we will see if it works. Apara glided along the wall until she was standing behind the president. She looked down at the woman's auburn hair, so perfectly curled and tinted. The president's fingernails were perfect, too: shaped and colored beautifully. She's never chipped a nail by doing hard work, Apara thought.

I could kill her now and it would look to them as if she had been struck down by god.

But her orders were otherwise. Apara waited.

The meeting broke up at last with the president firmly deciding to launch the attack within twenty-four hours.

"Tell me the instant everything's ready to go," she said to the chairman of the joint chiefs.

"Yes, ma'am," he said. "We'll need your positive order at that point."

"You'll get it."

She rose from her chair and they all got to their feet. Like a ghost, Apara followed the president through the door into a little sitting room, where two more uniformed security guards snapped to attention.

They accompanied her down the corridor to the main section of the

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mansion and left her at the elevator that went up to the living quarters on the top floor. Apara climbed the stairs; the elevator was too small. She feared the president would sense her presence in its cramped confines.

Unseen, unsensed, Apara tiptoed through the broad upstairs hallway with its golden carpet and spacious windows at either end. There were surveillance cameras discreetly placed up by the ceiling, but otherwise no obvious security up at this level — except the electronic sensors on the windows, of course.

The president lived alone here, except for her personal servants. Her husband had died years earlier, during her election campaign, in an airplane crash that won her a huge sympathy vote.

Apara loitered in the hallway, not daring to rest on one of the plush couches lining the walls, until a servant bearing a tray with a silver carafe and bottles of pills entered the president's bedroom. Apara slipped in behind her.

The black woman turned her head, frowning slightly, as if she heard a movement behind her or felt a breath on the back of her neck. Apara froze for a moment, then edged away as the woman reached for the door and closed it.

The president was showering, judging by the sounds coming from the bathroom. Legs aching from being on her feet for so many hours, Apara went to the far window and glanced out at the darkened garden, then turned back to watch the servant deposit the tray on the president's night table and leave the room, silent and almost as unnoticed as Apara herself.

There was one wooden chair in the bedroom and Apara sat on it gratefully, knowing that she would leave no telltale indentation on its hard surface. She felt very tired, sleepy. The adrenalin had drained out of her during the long meeting downstairs. She hoped the president would finish her shower and get into bed and go to sleep quickly.

It was not to be. The president came out of the bathroom soon enough, but she sat up in bed and read for almost another hour before finally putting down the paperback novel and reaching for the pills on the night table. One, two, three different pills she took, with sips of water or whatever was in the carafe the servant had left.

At last the president sank back on her pillows, snapped her fingers to turn off the lights, and closed her eyes. Apara waited the better part of

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another hour before stirring off the chair. She had to be certain that the president was truly, deeply asleep.

Slowly she walked to the side of the bed. She stared at the woman lying there, straining to hear the rhythm of her breathing through the insulated helmet.

Deep, slow breaths. She's really sleeping, Apara decided. If the thought of invading another country and killing thousands of people bothered her, she gave no indication of it. Maybe the pills she took helped her to sleep. She must have *some* qualms about what she was going to do.

Apara realized she was the one with the qualms. I can leave her here and get out of the mansion undetected, she told herself.

And the Cause, the purpose of her life, would evaporate like dew in the hot desert sun. Muldoon would be despairing, Ahmed so furious that he would never speak to her again. They would know she was unreliable, a risk to their own safety.

Strike! she told herself. They are all counting on you. Everything depends on you.

She struck.

BY SEVEN-FIFTEEN the next morning the White House was surrounded by an armed cordon of U.S. Marines. No one was allowed onto the grounds, no one was allowed to leave the mansion.

Apara had already left; she simply walked out with the cleaning crew, a few minutes after five A.M.

The president summoned her secretary of state to the oval office at eight sharp. It was early for him, and he had to pass through the gauntlet of Marines as well as the regular guards and secret service agents. He stared in wonder as more Marines, in their colorful full-dress uniforms, stood in place of the usual servants.

"What's going on?" he asked the president when he was finally ushered into the oval office.

She looked ghastly: her face was gray, her eyes darting nervously. She clutched a thin scrap of paper in one hand.

"Never mind," the president said curtly. "Sit down."

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The secretary of state sat in front of her desk. He himself felt bleary-eyed and rumpled, this early in the morning.

Without preamble, the president asked, "Carlos, do you seriously think we can settle this crisis without a military strike?"

The secretary of state looked surprised, but he quickly regained his wits. "I've been trying to tell you that for the past six weeks, Alicia."

"You think diplomacy can get us what we want."

"Diplomacy and economic pressures, yes. We can even get the United Nations on our side, if we call off this military strike. It's not too late, you know."

The president leaned back in her chair, fiddling with that scrap of paper, trying to keep her hands from trembling. Unwilling to allow her secretary of state to see how upset she was, she swiveled around to look out the long windows at the springtime morning. Birds chirped happily among the flowers.

"All right," she said, her mind made up. "Tell Muldoon to ask for an emergency session of the Security Council. That's what he's been after all along."

A boyish grin broke across the secretary of state's normally dour face. "I'll phone him right now. He's still in New York."

"Do that," said the president. Then she added, "From your own office."

"Yes, ma'am!"

The secretary of state trotted off happily, leaving the president alone at her desk in the oval office. With the note still clutched in her shaking hand.

I'll put the entire White House staff through the wringer, she said to herself. Every damned one of them. Interrogate them until their brains are fried. I'll find out who's responsible for this...this...

She shuddered involuntarily.

They got into my bedroom. My own bedroom! Who did it? How many people in this house are plotting against me?

They could have killed me!

I'll turn the note over to the secret service. No, they screwed up. If they were doing their job right this would never have happened. The attorney general. Give it to the F.B.I. They'll find the culprit.

Her hands were shaking so badly she could hardly read the note.

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Remember Caesar, thou art dust.

That's all the note said. Yet it struck terror into her heart. They could have killed me. This was just a warning. They could have killed me just as easily as leaving this warning on my pillow.

For the first time in her life, she felt afraid.

She looked around the oval office, at the familiar trappings of power, and felt afraid. It's like being haunted, she said to herself.

In his apartment in New York, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations nodded as he spoke to the president's security advisor.

"That's good news, Carlos!" said Herbert Muldoon, with a hint of Irish lilt in his voice. "Excellent news. I'm sure the president's made the right choice."

He cut the connection with Washington and immediately punched up the number of the U.N.'s secretary general, thinking as his fingers tapped on the keyboard:

It worked! Apara did the job. Now we'll have to send her to Tehran. And others, too, of course. The mullahs may be perfectly willing to send young assassins to their deaths, but I wonder how they'll react when they know they're the ones being targeted.

We'll find out soon.

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Ms. Seelhammer tells us she was infatuated with horses when she was young. At the age of eleven, she used her babysitting money to acquire a stubborn and ill-trained mare, which she boarded on a dairy farm next to the expensive stable on the outskirts of her Minnesota hometown. A few years have passed since then and she lives nowadays in the San Tan mountains of Arizona, but we don't know if she has horses there. Regardless, you'll find you're in for quite a ride when some new technology gets introduced into the stables.

Gentle Horses

By Cynthia Seelhammer

DIANE SLOWED THE ELECTRIC car and examined the calm yearlings grazing in the paddocks that bordered the drive leading to Equigenics stable. Most were bays or chestnuts, clean-lined and healthy looking, if a little eerie in their stillness. She was impressed and a bit surprised to find that this relatively new genetic engineering operation included nearly a hundred acres of irrigated fields and pastures as well as the modern stable and arenas.

Her first job interview, by vidphone, had left her with the impression that Equigenics was little more than a start-up business, just a riding academy with maybe an old barn, a lab in the garage and a handful of horses. The director, Len Malcolm, had emphasized the need for someone willing to do "hands-on dirty work." He needed someone to run the stable and manage riding lessons, but he wanted someone who knew the science as well. It sounded exactly like what she needed: way too much work and responsibility, enough to absorb her completely and force her to forget everything else. And, better yet, it would be a return to the world of horses.

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It seemed that most of the recent wrong turns in her life had started when she left that world for university research. That turn in the road of life, like her marriage, had led to a dead end. So now, after three months of unemployment, Diane was determined to get this job.

She parked the car, stepped out onto the gravel lot and squinted in the sharp sunlight. She shaded her eyes and watched an impatient-looking woman urge two little girls wearing riding clothes into the back seat of an expensive propane sedan. The sight made her smile a little wryly, it was so familiar. How many hundreds of times had her mother shuttled her to riding lessons? For a time it had seemed as if she might follow her mother's example and be the one doing the shuttling. But not anymore.

As the sedan drove away, Diane followed it with her eyes, watching it disappear behind the low, rolling hills where the road curved back toward the wealthier suburbs of the city. The green of the fenced fields and the tan of the distant hills calmed her. She took a deep breath and headed for the office.

Len Malcolm in person was as abrupt and no-nonsense as he had been on the vidphone. He was clean shaven and his dark hair was trimmed short. He wore very plain clothes. He shook her hand with precisely the appropriate amount of pressure; this was a man used to control. She felt her own emotions rise a notch in response and had to squelch the desire to say something outrageous. She doubted that this man had any sense of humor.

Len did not look at her when he spoke. Instead, he seemed to talk just past her head, never making eye contact. He acted as if he were irritated by her very presence. Diane tried to ignore it. After some brief, uncomfortable small talk came a tour of the facility. They would continue the interview when they returned to the office, Len said.

In the arena, two of the advanced students were practicing jumps. They rode grays with identical programming — and it showed in the way the horses approached each jump. Diane recognized the physical type of the horses from some of the cataloguing she had done at the university: a common Irish hunter line. The source of the viral programming was not familiar to her. But then that was the specialty of Equigenics — tailoring programming of knowledge with viruses.

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She and Len leaned against the arena rail and watched the grays canter, each hoof kicking up a puff of dust, the horses grunting when they jumped. One of the riders was less skilled than the other; when she sat too fast, she threw off the balance of her horse and there was a loud *thunk* as the left rear hoof knocked off the top rail.

On the walk back, Diane saw grooms distribute alfalfa cubes to the box stalls of the breeding stock. Three stalls were empty, the horses turned out into paddocks while their stalls were cleaned. The odors of the feed and manure brought back memories. It smelled like home.

Len narrated the tour in abrupt announcements of fact. He pointed out things that anyone who had spent any time at all in a stable would know. Diane nodded politely.

"Arion is the center of the current research," Len said as they turned the corner toward the most isolated of the box stalls. For the first time, his stony face showed some expression: a combination of pride and something else, something like lust. When he noticed her watching him, the expression vanished. But she had seen it and it reminded her of her ex-husband when he used to speak about the mindgames he played on those who competed with him for research dollars.

Diane followed his gaze. The stall had reinforced bars and an industrial strength door. At first she could not see into the gloom behind the bars. Something moved in that dark, something breathed, but she could not make out a shape until her eyes adjusted.

The stallion was taller than was usual, at least eighteen hands. He stood in the far corner and watched them, crunching the hay cubes, his finely boned head tilted to one side so he could watch them with one too-intelligent eye, both sharp-pointed ears straining forward to catch Len's voice.

Arion was black. Very black. Not dark bay, not a coat that faded to gray or seal brown or that would fade in the sun, but so black that the light reflected from his coat looked blue; a fantasy color that immediately identified him as a designed horse. The horse snorted and took the few steps to the door, lifting his nose to the grate. Diane moved forward, pressing her palm on the other side and gently blew into the horse's nose, trading breath. The stallion snorted and backed up. Diane turned and looked at Len. "Nice."

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Len narrowed his eyes. "You have no idea." He walked back toward the office.

Diane felt a stab of embarrassment, quickly squelched by anger. "So tell me," she said, walking fast to catch up with him. "I can't appreciate what I don't know."

"He is not just some pretty genetic package. He is programmed at championship level," Len said, slowing down slightly.

"Okay. So where's he competed?"

"He hasn't — yet. I plan to start him in the fall. When I find the right rider." He stopped and turned toward her. "Listen, I think you've seen enough. I'll call you if I want to talk to you again."

Diane felt as if she had been dismissed. She stopped walking. "Wait just a minute," she said. "That's it? That's the interview?" She felt herself grow tense with rage. "What kind of a..."

A crash interrupted her, then a horse's scream. "Arion," Len shouted and ran back toward the stall, Diane one step behind him.

The stallion stood trembling at the back of the stall, one rear leg still in the air, ready to kick. There was a gouge in the wall from an earlier kick. He shook his head and bared his teeth, crashing both rear hooves at the stall wall, the impact so severe it shook the wall.

A groom ran to Len with a med kit and a palm-sized trank gun. Len shoved him out of the way, yanked open the big latch on the stall door and shouldered his way in. Arion paced in tight circles, pawing straw and striking the wall with rear hooves. Len slid the heavy door closed behind him.

Diane watched through the door's metal screen as Len whispered to the horse. The stallion was backed into a corner now, head high, nostrils flared, white foam of sweat along his arched neck and wide chest. The groom cursed in Spanish behind her. He called Arion a devil horse.

Whatever Len was doing seemed to be working; Arion lowered his head and calmed his breathing.

"Diane." Len spoke in the same calming tone, but he gestured slowly toward her without turning his head. She slid the door open enough to squeeze into the stall and walked up behind Len. Arion snorted and jerked his head up; she froze.

"Talk to him," Len said. "He's the most important part of this operation. He's going to be your responsibility, if you're good enough."

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"I'm good enough," she said. "I have years of experience in training and stable management, and I just left a research position...." Arion snorted again, rolled an eye, and began to shift his weight.

"Shut up," Len said in the same soothing voice he'd been using on the horse. "Just shut the fuck up and talk to the horse. Tell him what a beauty he is, what a technological wonder, how you will ride him, how he is going to make us all famous. He doesn't give a shit about your degrees or experience."

Diane felt herself blush, a heat that crawled up her neck to her face. She was about to turn and leave when Len added "...or aren't you good enough, after all."

She took another step forward and began to prattle in a calm tone, words from lullabies, sound that ran from her toward the stallion. She reached to touch the horse and he let her caress his neck. She felt something like electricity between them; it flowed up her arm and she knew she had the stallion's complete attention. He stretched his big head toward her and sniffed loudly. She blew into the wide nostrils. He was a beautiful animal and all her thoughts focused on his large, dark eyes. She forgot about Len except to notice he was no longer in the stall. She talked to the stallion until he was completely calm and his head leaned against her shoulder. By then it was dark outside.

That should show the bastard, she thought as she slipped out of the stall.

She moved into the empty apartment above the stable the next day. And she got the pay she asked for.

THE NEXT WEEK, the night that the two new breeding mares arrived, Arion had another episode. The mares were in the box stalls as far from Arion as possible. But that night the stallion could smell them, hear them nicker to him, feel their heat, sense their raised tails and winking vulvas. When he started to kick the walls, the crashing woke Diane. She ran out of her apartment in her night-clothes to find Len already at Arion's stall.

Len moved the mares one at a time to pens just outside the barn, disappearing into the night as soon as he stepped outside. Diane stood in the stall next to Arion's, talking soothing nonsense in the gloom, fingers

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hooked into the steel screening. The stallion's frustration came in waves, an invisible heat flashing across her skin. Then Len walked up behind her and she could sense him, just as Arion had sensed the mares. She heard the crisp sound of crushed new straw as he approached. Arion was suddenly still. She didn't turn toward Len, didn't even think; he put one hand over hers on the screen, the other around her waist. She felt his weight, heavy as the silence, and his breath on the tender skin between her collar and hairline. She pressed into Len, all of her back and hips curved against him. Len pushed his face to her neck, nipping her with soft lips. She turned toward him and lifted her arms. He held her and rocked gently back and forth. She twined a leg around him and he lowered her to the deep straw, lay beside her and lowered his head to her breasts. She ran her fingers through his hair in short, hard motions.

The rest of the horses were oblivious to their movements in the straw, but Arion breathed in harsh, nervous gasps. A small voice in Diane's mind objected, but she was so filled with longing that she only gasped, matching the sound of the stallion. She fumbled with the snaps of Len's shirt and felt him tense and pull away from her. He pushed himself to his feet and walked from the stall fast, his boots clicking on the flooring of the alley. Diane sat up and wondered what the hell had happened.

HER MOTHER called too early that morning, awake and cheerful in another time zone. What had happened in the night with Len came back to Diane with a rush. He had all but run away from her.

"You sound tired," her mother said.

"It's four A.M.," Diane growled.

"Is it? I always forget how that works. Your father's in Rio with his latest 'friend.' He says hello and congratulations on your first real job, but he wishes you would have let him find you something better. He could have helped you get something permanent at the university, you know. How are things?"

"I don't know yet," Diane said, thinking how she would never again put up with the politics at the university, politics she had failed at. And she hoped she would never have to ask her father to pull strings for her. But what could she tell her mother about this place, or about Len? Not a thing.

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"It's really busy here, Mom," she said. "Everyone wants foals born just after the first of the year, so all the mares are being implanted now. And we still have to run all the riding lessons."

"Are you sure this is the right kind of job? I know you feel you need to prove something after the trouble at school, but..."

"Mom. You promised."

"Well, I can't help it. You had every advantage here and you just.... Divorce is not the worst thing in the world, you know. And the loss of that research project was not your fault, you were just the one easiest to blame. None of that matters. But you sound sad. I can't believe you don't have a vidphone. What kind of place is that?"

Diane thought about what she could possibly say that would reassure her mother. "It's a start-up, Mom. My boss is...brilliant. But I don't really know him at all."

"What's his name?"

"Len Malcolm."

"Malcolm? I don't know any Malcolms. It's not like he owns the place, is it? Your father said it's a corporate operation."

"It's not corporate — yet. This is just a little place with a couple of investors. But Len's got some corporation interested. He owns the stud that's going to be used as a source. He helped design him. If this new line makes it, he'll be able to have his own place. It's a big risk."

"Then he should be careful. I always told your father to be careful. He never listened to me though. If this Malcolm succeeds, he won't need you anymore, right? Maybe you can come home then, and settle down."

"I'm not moving back there, Mom. And if he succeeds, maybe I'll be part of the success." If I can stick it out, Diane thought. If I don't go crazy.

That night, after a long day of work with grooms and teaching staff and watching the progress of little girls in pigtails, Diane stopped in the office to look through the e-mail. She half hoped Len would stop by so they could talk, but he stayed in his lab, as usual. Later, on the way to her apartment, she was drawn to the stall of each of the motionless brood mares. She touched their velvet muzzles, the prickle of whiskers like the stubble of an unshaved lover. She pushed forelocks from deep brown eyes,

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scratched around ears, and whispered into the long, smooth necks, inhaling the smell of spring grasses, salt, and autumn straw.

Len found her with the mare nearest Arion. He stood behind Diane and reached over her shoulder to run his hand down the mare's smooth withers and across the intricate whorl of hair along a flank. With his other hand he stroked the back of Diane's head, the arch of her neck, and brushed salty fingers gently across her lips. She wondered, just faintly and for a fleeting moment, why she was doing this, why Len, why they had not spoken of it. Arion snorted and pawed with a forefoot, sharp punctuation to his ragged breathing. Then all her conscious thoughts vanished, replaced with longing, desire, need.

The next morning, except for the bruises on her hips and the fragment of straw in her hair, Diane would have thought she had dreamed it.

"While I'm gone, stick to the schedule."

Len was packing his briefcase for a shuttle to Dallas to judge a week-long dressage competition. There was talk that one of the contenders was worth considering for sourcing. Len wanted to check him out and compare him to Arion. "Make no changes, got it? And keep an eye on that Cunningham kid."

Diane had been called into the office for this briefing. It was the first time they had talked face to face since the interview. He usually just left her e-mail and locked himself in his lab with orders not to be disturbed.

And when they met at night, there was no talk.

"That kid could be trouble," Len said. "She's on some kind of scholarship and the other students don't like her."

"I thought she was doing okay, that we had all the right horses and right programs for all the riders."

"She's riding fine, but keep her away from Arion. I caught her at his stall this morning when I went to exercise him. I told her to stay away, that he could be dangerous. He's not like the mares she rides."

"Maybe she's just curious."

Len looked up from the briefcase for a second, eyes a startling and angry flash of blue, then back down. He pushed a handful of folders into a side pocket. "I'm serious. I don't want her, or any of the others, near him. Only you."

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"She's dropped off here really early and she stays all day. If the other students don't like her she probably gets bored. Why are you so touchy?"

Len shrugged. He zipped the briefcase shut.

Diane wanted to scream *Why won't you look at me? Talk to me?* Instead she took a deep breath and said softly: "Is it this trip? What's wrong?"

"No, this trip is important. The Texas breeders are important. It's the timing of it. Keeping everything constant is essential. You're sure you're ready for the viral transfers?"

"All I do is run the programs, right? It's not a big deal. Don't worry."

"I always worry," he said. "That's one of the secrets to success in this business."

Five horses walked nose to tail along the rail of the indoor arena, moving in and out of dusty pools of light cast by spots hidden in the high ceiling. Little girls, backs very straight, hands held low, sat atop them. The horses moved at a regular, patient gait, gazing straight ahead. Two were bays, one with a cropped mane; one gray; one chestnut with white pasterns and a blaze; and the last was spotted, a black-and-white paint. Except for the rhythmic motion of legs and bobbing heads, the horses and small riders could have been from an old-fashioned carousel, spinning in slow motion with no music.

Beginner classes require patience, Diane thought as she watched the students and their teacher. Not patience on the part of these pampered girls in their jewel- and pastel-colored clothes, sitting so high up the backs of such immense animals. The teacher, standing in the center of the ring, turning to watch the riders, needed the patience. There was no possibility of any unexpected action. The mares were walking wombs, nothing more: perfect practice mounts, so placid there was sometimes a risk that health problems would be overlooked. Making sure nothing was overlooked was part of Diane's job.

Diane's thoughts drifted. What did these students feel? Diane tried to remember from her early lessons but she realized it didn't compare.

Confident. That's how they would feel. Confident that they looked good and would soon learn enough to try one of the horses programmed

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with a more complex riding program. In a couple of years they would own their own top-of-the-line mounts, bring home ribbons and trophies enough to fill fireplace mantels, and fulfill parental expectations and financial investments. Then they would move on, train in dressage or jumping, or lose interest in riding and study etiquette or gymnastics, prepare for the cotillion, the grand tour, the next season's coming-out event.

The monied class was grasping at past symbols of privilege, staying "pure," as if doing so would stop change in the world. The families of these girls guarded them every bit as much as they did their homes with their interactive security systems and their walled, guarded communities. After these lessons, and other rites of passage, these girls would make the financially correct marriage, conceive the appropriate number of heirs, and nurture the next generation of monied little girls to take riding lessons. Diane realized that the girls might not be that different from the very gentle mares they were riding. After all, they were bred and programmed for one purpose, weren't they? Maybe that was unfair. The same thing could have been said about her.

The difference was that she had managed to escape and build her own life. Or at least she was trying to, even if it meant a false start or two.

Besides, her history was not quite the same as that of the little girls'. Yes, she came from the same class and background. But the horses Diane learned to ride hadn't been programmed at all. How had she felt when she rode? Excited. Knowing that the thousand-kilo animal she was learning to control had a mind of its own and could choose to obey or not, to throw her off and run away, or to execute the turn she was trying for, making her look as if she were the one in charge.

The teacher clapped her hands and the five horses stopped and stood still, not even an ear twitching. The girls dismounted, four from tiny English saddles, slithering off as if from a playground slide. The fifth, on the paint, swung her right leg over the back of the horse and dropped from a western saddle. She was much taller than the others and wore creamy buckskin chaps, a fringed shirt and bolero. The other four girls wore brilliant jodhpurs with silk tops, soft black knee-high boots and velvet-covered hard hats. Two carried riding crops.

Once they stood in the sand of the ring floor, these four began to chatter among themselves; they took the reins and led their horses out of

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the ring into the main part of the barn. Two of the girls were so small they could almost walk right underneath the horses. Their voices were chirps in the immense arena, distorted and lost in the soft sand and high, dark ceilings. The horses followed the girls with careful, patient steps.

Diane watched the four who rode English. The girl in the chaps trailed behind. She was Vita Cunningham, but Diane could never remember which of the other four girls was which. She thought of them by the horses they rode, using the mares' code names or file numbers from their lip tattoos. The horses' histories, bloodlines, tailoring and programming she knew in exact detail. They were the purest of traditional strains, no cross-genre or constructs here.

The two bays were Beta 8 and 9, genetically identical, a combination of the Dublin and Kodaka lines, considered state-of-the-art six years ago, now rumored to be susceptible to colic or founder toward end of term. Diane had notes to watch them closely when the time came. The gray Cosmo came from a knock-off Arabian splicer and she was old, but had a good record. The chestnut Gusto 24 was carrying her first foal and had no record, but others with similar combinations had good reports. The paint was Navajo, some kind of personal preference of Len's, Kodaka genes wrapped in Indian pony coloring. A horse from his northern Arizona ranch childhood or something. He never explained anything. All five were programmed for maximum stability, basic brood mare traits, and beginner riding lessons.

Diane followed the black-and-white paint down the immaculate alley and turned right, toward the box stalls, to do a visual check. One mare stood in a corner of its stall, chewing hay cubes from a feeder. The others hung their heads over the stall door into the alley, the flutter of eyelashes and breath from nostrils their only movement, eyes black and motionless. The girls groomed their beginner mares, each horse cross-tied in front of its stall. Diane stopped to watch the girls as they stretched and ducked, using soft brushes and hard currycombs to groom their horses.

"You have to finish intermediate, then you can ride a jumper," Diane heard the girl from the gray say. She was brushing a foreleg. "It took my sister two years."

"Some people go faster," Vita said. She stood near the paint's head, fiddling with the bit on the bridle. Her hair hung down to hide her face. Her

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hands were large, nails chewed short. "If you have the right program and the right horse, you can learn faster."

"That's stupid. You still have to learn all the levels. And as you advance, you change horses to one with more advanced programming."

"Yeah, and if you want to compete, you have to prove you did them all," said the girl from the chestnut.

"I heard that it used to be if you rode the same horse all the time, you got so good you could read each other's mind."

"That's stupid, too. If you rode the same horse all the time then both you and the horse would have to learn everything and it would take twice as long." She looked around at Diane. "Right, Ms. Newton?"

Diane thought about how she learned. "It used to take a long time," she said. "People lost interest, it took so long. It was dangerous too."

"But that's the way *you* learned." Vita tilted her head so her hair fell across one eye. "With just one horse."

"Yes. A thoroughbred gelding." She remembered the sense of victory when she'd finally gained control of him, making him do just what she wanted when she wanted.

"Could you read his mind?" There was longing in Vita's voice.

"No." Not really, no matter how much she had wished for it. "But when you ride well, it looks that way." Felt that way, too.

"Staying with one horse would be boring anyway," said the girl with the gray. Diane left them and went to Arion's stall.

The stallion was near the door, looking through his screen which was closed so he couldn't put his head out. Couldn't risk having some student getting bitten, after all. The barred window on the far wall painted a square of morning sunlight onto the golden straw and black lacquer of Arion's chest and forelegs.

When he saw Diane, the horse shook his head, black mane tumbling from one side of his long neck to the other, and took a step back out of the sunlight. For a second she felt a flash of fear. Any stallion was unpredictable. Arion stretched his neck toward the screen, nostrils wide, breathing with a huffing sound. She thought of Len, a quick stab of heat in her belly. She pressed her palm against the screen. "Hey, boy, it's okay, shhh." Arion's nose nearly touched her hand, a fine soft gray blending to black. There would be parties in Dallas, and trade shows with corporate breeders.

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What would Len be doing tonight? Arion jerked his head back. He pawed the straw. Why did she care? Diane walked off toward the office.

That evening Diane spent a frustrating half-hour in her apartment trying to reason on the phone with the mother of one of the riding students, a woman who was convinced that her daughter was a genius and should progress faster than the others. The call had interrupted dinner. The stir-fry cooled and her appetite sank as her anger rose. When she hung up the phone, after agreeing to meet with the woman later in the week, she accidently kicked the saddle stand, tripped, and fell onto the couch. She pounded her fists on the couch cushion in frustration.

Crashing sounds from the stable interrupted her fit of temper. She raced down the stairs, headed straight for Arion. As she neared the stall, her heart pounding, the screen above the door flew open with the sound of shrieking metal. Arion continued to kick, using both back feet, making strangled noises of rage. Diane thought about using the intercom to call some of the grooms from their trailers. Someone would get hurt if she did, she knew it. She scuttled along the alley as far from Arion as possible and went to the lab for the trank gun.

Len woke her early in the morning, calling from Dallas, his voice lost in the noise of a party.

"How is everything?"

"What?" Dreams of flight still clouded her mind, images of deserts, skies the color of flame. Her legs tangled in the sheets. She had slept so soundly she had trouble waking.

"How is Arion acting?"

"Fine, everything is fine." She yawned and tried to remember what she had meant to tell him.

She heard laughter and shouting. Music blared loud and faded again. "...revolution," someone said. A woman's shrill voice said, "They'd pay millions!" Len said nothing.

"Where are you? It sounds like a party." Diane asked.

"It is, sort of. It's the investors. I have to go but I wanted to make sure everything was okay. We might have some important visitors when I get back."

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"Everything's fine," Diane said. "Good luck."

The conversation ended. She realized as she hung up that he'd said nothing to *her,* not really. He'd just been checking in with the office.

At dawn, when she got up despite a foggy headache, she realized she had forgotten to tell him about Arion and the smashed stall door. She pulled on jeans and a soft, warm shirt, and walked down the stairs to the stable, through the tender sounds of the mares sleeping, their dreams as blank as their eyes.

In the lab she made a cup of very strong coffee and looked through the latest readouts. Test results showed an anomaly in the hormone levels of the two Beta bays. She checked the file cabinet for copies of their levels from last year, but she couldn't find them. She wondered if Len had them in his lab. As she headed in that direction she felt a stab of guilt. She ignored it. After all, he had never exactly ordered her not to go into the lab.

The place was smaller than she remembered from the brief tour. A computer console and a row of file cabinets lined one wall. The rest of the space was taken up by the thermo-cycler on a table in the center, the walk-in refrigerator and shelves of carefully labeled beakers, flasks and milk bottles. She headed for the file cabinet. All the drawers were locked.

She was about to leave when she noticed the row of bound printouts stacked next to the console screen. The corner of a file folder stuck out beside one of them. She slid it out and found it filled with clippings and hard copies about the stable.

She looked through the clips, reading things she already knew about the operation. Others were about Len Malcolm: his scholarships and research awards when he was young, his work with Kodaka on the Falk hunter. One clipping from a small town paper in Arizona described his graduate degrees. She read that with interest. One early thesis was titled *Exploration of Recessive Nature of Sensitive Traits Among Highly Trained Performance Horses.* Another was *Field Observations of Stallion Dominance in Wild Mustang Herds.* Another was *Marketing Progressive Lessons Through the Use of Incremental Program Changes.*

She closed the file and started to slide it back where she had found it. She paused and pulled open one of the bound printouts. Records of some experiments, she noted. Careful descriptions of the effect of various dosages on test subjects. The dates were recent and it looked as if a new

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subject had been added. She knew some horses required drugs to be made susceptible to programming with viruses. She could not tell which horses were the subjects of these tests; the names were in some kind of code.

Diane sighed, put the book back and left the lab. She made a note to herself to talk to Len about the mare's hormone levels and about these tests. If one of the brood mares was being drugged, she needed to know it.

ARION WAS QUIET when Diane checked him, an hour before the beginner class. Vita was peering over the stall door at him, but she disappeared around a corner as soon as she saw Diane approach. The stallion stood in the center of his stall, legs braced outward and head hanging toward the straw. He reminded Diane of the brood mares. She ordered the door repaired and reduced his feed. That might help keep him calm.

Len returned with contracts secured for most of the unborn foals. He had arranged preliminary distribution rights with the new dressage source. He should have been jubilant, but he was distant. Diane had reports on fetal development and hormone levels waiting for him, but he didn't even look at them.

"How is Arion?" was his first question.

"He was almost unmanageable a couple times, but he's fine now. I changed his feed."

"What?" His face hardened and he stared at her with narrowed eyes.

"I reduced the calories. There's no need for him to be hyped up all the time now."

"I told you — no changes while I was gone. Change it back. Kodaka is sending a team here to look at him. They're bringing a mare too. I want him like he was before I left, right on the edge, ready for breeding. This is important."

"Why?"

"Just do it."

The Kodaka mare arrived in the night; Len took care of settling her into a stall himself. This visit had to be kept very quiet, Len told Diane; too many students were around and information traveled way too fast.

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Diane never saw the people who brought the mare, but when they left, Len went with them.

That night Diane dreamed of roaring sounds, twisting motions, burning flames, and woke to find herself visiting the mares again. She'd been asleep but now she stood barefoot in the straw. She could hear Arion squealing. She longed for something, fought desire, felt waves of heat. She forced herself back to the stairs and up to her apartment. She sat on the floor, back against the door, knees curled to her chest, waiting for daylight. She could not define the turmoil she felt, did not know what she needed. She suffered passion soaring and falling. But there was fear most of all.

At dawn Diane dressed slowly, her hands shaking as she pulled on her boots. She went down the stairs to the stallion's stall, her steps loud in the quiet.

Vita stood in front of the stall door, on tiptoes, fingers curled into the screen. Arion faced her, making low, rough sounds. The girl did not move.

There was a sound from the stall across from Arion and Diane saw the new mare, black as cinders, circling, rubbing up against the door and screen of her stall. No placid brood mare, she snorted and struck out, turning fast. Vita turned too, first to one side, then the other, pressing herself against the stall door. The mare pawed the straw. Vita moaned.

Diane felt the heat from all the nights, frustration and longing filling her mind, stretching into her soul. She took a step forward. The stallion rumbled. The mare squealed. Vita echoed the sound, thin and sharp.

No, no, this is wrong, Diane thought. I am in control, you obey me. She remembered the gelding she first learned to ride, his sly movements, testing her. She remembered the feel of Len pressed against her, the feel of the sharp blades of straw against her back. The mare squealed again, turning to kick at the stall door. Vita cried out.

Diane realized she was panting. She wrapped her hands around the handle of the nearest stall door, her nails digging into the wood.

Len had done this. This was the secret, the horse to replace all the programmed steps, the horse that would change the industry. One horse, not just programmed, but linked to its rider. So closely linked that when Arion was tranquilized, she had felt tranquilized too. But who would be in control? He had experimented on her, testing Arion's abilities, observ-

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ing them just like he'd watched the wild mustangs, noting dominance and control. She took deep breaths, focused on her anger. Arion whirled in his stall, facing her. The window glowed behind him, soft light silhouetting his head and neck. He shouted a challenge, head up, leaping a stiff step forward.

She felt her anger grow, her legs relax. She sidled past the stalls, step by step, headed for the lab. The trank gun was there, and the other things she would need. She would be in control.

Arion shrieked another challenge behind her. She felt her anger grow and used it to fire her determination. She began to count loudly inside her mind, blocking out all emotion. *One, two, three...* She carried the gun back to the mare, pushing Vita aside as she did so. The girl stumbled and fell.

Diane set the gun to the highest level, aimed through the grill, and shot the mare three time. She kept counting in her mind, *four, five, six...* The mare grunted, then grew still, and collapsed like a string puppet into the straw. Diane felt the tension fall, as if a window had closed. Then she sensed fear from Arion, then rage.

There was a choking sound from Vita. The girl was scrambling to her feet, growling in fury, *seven, eight, nine...* Diane set the gun to its lowest level and shot Vita, the dart hitting the girl in the front of her thigh. Vita stumbled, leaned against the stall door and slid to the floor, *ten, eleven, twelve...*

Diane stood and looked at the stallion. He was so enraged that he shuddered as he stood. This was no horse, this was a mind-controlling evil. This animal had no right to exist, to dominate the minds of people around it. He was the pinnacle of Len's research, but he was wrong, all wrong. All the breeding and programming, it was a mistake. It had to be ended.

She tucked the trank gun into the oversized pocket of her jacket. But still, all that programming, all the pain she had been through... Would it all be wasted? No. She headed for the tack room to collect bridle and saddle. Before Arion was destroyed, she would ride him.

She grew calm with the certainty. She visualized herself saddling a calm horse and concentrated on the image. She carried the tack toward the now silent stall where the stallion stood waiting for her.

She opened the stall door and left it open, stepping into the straw. She

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avoided looking at the horse's head. I have no emotions but calm, she thought as she mechanically lifted the saddle onto the stallion's back. He flinched, but did not step away. I have no emotions, just steady progress, she thought to herself and began to again count in her mind, *one, two, three...* She reached under his belly for the cinch and pulled it tight in one swift movement, *four, five, six...* Then she took the bridle from her shoulder and, without making eye contact, slid the bit into Arion's mouth and the leather over his ears, buckling the strap under his jaw, *seven, eight, nine...*

She put her hands onto his withers and with one jump, she was on her stomach across his back, *ten, eleven, twelve...* She swung her right leg over and searched for the stirrups with her feet as she ducked her head and directed the horse out of the stall. She felt Arion tremble beneath her, sensed his confusion. She visualized the paddock in front of the stable. She concentrated hard and turned the horse toward the door, *one, two, three...*

The door opened and Len stepped inside. Arion stopped dead. Diane forgot what number came next.

"What the hell are you doing?" Len shouted.

Arion began to tremble violently. He tried to turn his head but Diane corrected him with a jerk of the rein.

"Get out of my way," Diane said, suddenly more angry than afraid, feeling her emotion begin to mix with that of Arion.

Len ran a few steps toward them. The horse took a fast step back and hopped to the side. Len grabbed for the rein, but the horse shied away.

"Get off! Right now, get off!" He grabbed again for the rein, but Arion took two fast steps backwards. Diane had sensed the move and was able to keep her balance. She felt the horse as if he were an extension of her own body.

For a second she imagined herself with Len, at night in the stall. She viewed the scene, and herself, from above and behind.

She sensed the control that Len had used on her, feeding his lust to the stallion. And hadn't she been full of desire? But it had not been real. It had not been her choice. She looked down at Len, red-faced and shouting as he again reached for the rein.

Still watching from above, she saw herself shift her weight and she felt the strength of the stallion as he reared. She sensed the feel of the kick,

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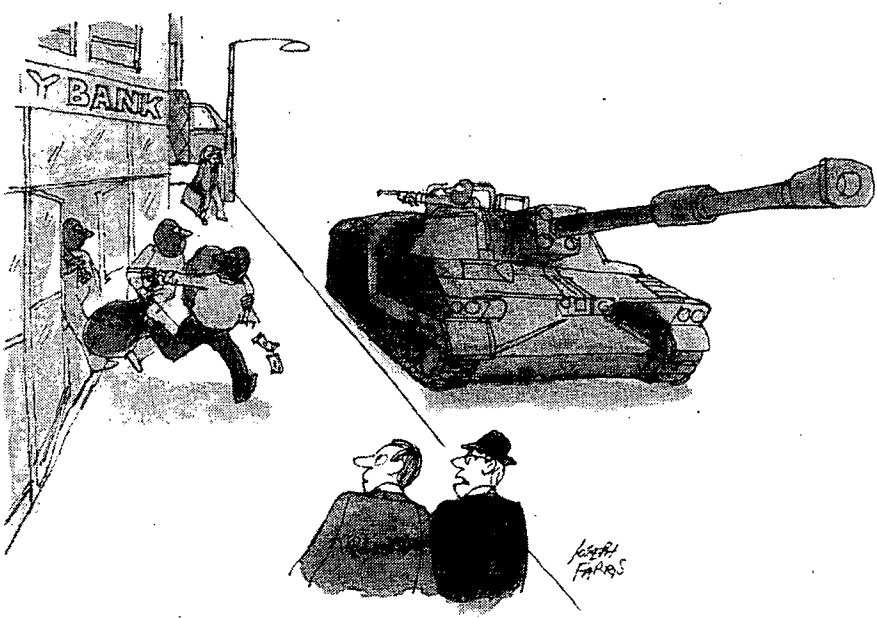
the stretch of the full extension as the horse lashed out at Len, hitting him full in the chest and knocking him back against the wall. She felt the perfection of the controlled spin as the horse pirouetted 180 degrees, then bucked, hitting Len again with both back hooves. She watched herself and the horse sidestep, then two more strikes with the forefeet, before a leap toward the door. She did not turn to look at the crumpled and bloody body as she lunged into the dawn.

As she galloped onto the gravel she felt herself expand, to move higher, to watch from farther above. She sensed a fury from the stallion, a desire to flee, to escape the fight. It matched her own emotions. She loosened her control, both physical and emotional. She focused her thoughts on the trank gun tucked in her pants, and the horse slowed, hesitating for a fraction of a second before extending his stride and racing faster. She could feel his heart pumping, hear the rush of his breathing. Her mind was filled with the steady motion of the horse, the feel of the wind. Arion surged forward, stretching to a faster gallop, down the road and toward the dusty hills.



"The police are out-gunned once again!"

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Question: *Who has graced these pages fifteen times since 1981 and plans to drop in again before too long?*

Answer: *He may not be the fairest of them all, but the wizard Kedrigern is always welcome in these parts, particularly when he has one of those enchanted mirrors causing a stir.*

Reflection and Insight

By John Morressy

WITH SPOT'S HELP, KEDRIGERN wrestled the large awkward bundle carefully into the cottage as Princess looked on with anxious interest. It was wrapped in heavy cloths, tied securely, and from the amount of grunting the wizard was doing, it was of considerable weight.

"Is it very heavy?" she asked.

"Very," he said, putting it down gingerly and taking a deep breath.

"You're lucky you had Spot to help you."

He rubbed his lower back and groaned. "Even with Spot's help, I was tempted to use a levitation. I should have. My back will ache for a week."

"What is it?"

He smiled and began to untie the cord that encircled the bundle like the strands of a great web. That done, he turned back the folds of thick cloth, pausing with his hand on the last one. "You're going to love this. A pity it's promised to a client, Sigert of the Nine Shallow Ponds. But I'm looking for another, for us."

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"What is it?" she repeated, her interest increasing.

He flung back the last cloth and spread his arms in a gesture of revelation, beaming at her all the while.

"A mirror?" she said.

"That's right, my dear. You've often said that you'd like to have one by the door."

"Only a little one, so I can check to see that my coronet is on straight, and my wings aren't all bunched up under my cloak. This one is...it's sort of elaborate, isn't it?"

"This is no ordinary mirror, my dear."

"I can see that. It's very nice, really," said Princess, leaning closer to the surface and studying her reflection. "No warps or wiggly places in the glass."

"It's a magic mirror."

She took two steps back and looked at him sharply. "I've had one bad experience with a magic mirror, and I don't want another. Don't bother getting one for us, please."

"Moggropple's was a unique problem. And it involved five mirrors. This is only a single mirror, and all it does is talk."

"I don't care. I don't want a tricky mirror around the house."

Crestfallen, Kedrigern said, "I thought that something like this might be nice for those times when I'm away on business and you have no one to talk to but Spot."

"I appreciate the thought, but no." She took his hand, smiled to soothe his feelings, and said, "Anyway, talking mirrors must be very rare. And terribly expensive."

Kedrigern gestured airily. "I got this one for a song. An incantation, actually. Against pains in the joints."

"Well, you won't find another on such terms, I'm sure. Besides, I'd sooner talk to Spot when you're away than to a mirror," said Princess.

"Whatever you say, my dear. But as long as it's here, why don't you take a look."

She smoothed down her dark blue gown, straightened her coronet, and stepped before the mirror. She half turned, fluttered her wings, then rose from the floor and did a slow pirouette.

"It's a very nice mirror," she said.

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"Say something to it."

She frowned. "What does one say to a mirror?"

"How about 'Here's looking at you'?"

Princess gave him a pained glance. She pursed her lips thoughtfully, and after a time said, "Mirror, how do I look?"

The surface of the mirror shimmered like a pool in a gentle breeze. Colors flashed and flickered across it, then slowly faded. A silvery voice said, "How do you look? Very good, for a woman your age."

Princess's hand shot up, snatched the cloth, and flung it over the face of the mirror. "That will be quite enough out of you," she snapped in a voice cold enough to frost the glass. Turning to Kedrigern, she said, "A hand mirror will suffice. A silent one," and fluttered from the room.

"As you wish, my dear," he called after her.

He was relieved by her decision. An attractive and serviceable hand mirror was easily obtained. Talking mirrors were hard to come by and very nearly priceless, even when the seeker was well-known and much respected, with extensive contacts in the magical community. He could not expect to be lucky twice.

After receiving Sigert's plea for assistance, it was months before Kedrigern even got wind of a faint rumor of a magic mirror, and many more before he actually traced it down, ascertained its provenance, and satisfied himself of its authenticity. Haggling over the price dragged on for two more months, and might have taken longer if the owner, an aging seneschal, had not been stricken with a painful bout of rheumatism. Transporting the mirror intact to his cottage took Kedrigern another full month. The whole operation consumed so much time, in fact, that there was none left for the usual full-scale safety check. The mirror was to be a surprise birthday present for Sigert's queen, and only if he departed for the Kingdom of the Nine Shallow Ponds the very next morning and encountered no obstacles along the way could Kedrigern hope to deliver the mirror on Brissault's birthday.

With the help of Spot and a very small levitation spell he stowed the mirror safely in a wagon, surrounding it with padding and protective spells. Princess chose not to accompany him on the journey. "In the first place," she explained, "I am a princess, not a freight-handler. And in the second place, from what you've told me, the Kingdom of the Nine Shallow

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Ponds is not a happy place. I don't want to take a long, slow, uncomfortable journey just to be surrounded by gloom."

"I intend to dispel the gloom, my dear."

But she had decided, and was adamant. After a brief but tender farewell, he set out just before dawn, aching and yawning, comforted only by the thought of a generous fee and a chance to save a marriage.

The weather was benign and his journey was uneventful. Kedrigern had ample time to ponder the misfortunes of the royal couple. Having won the confidence of both king and queen, he had been made privy to all the details.

Sometime in their third decade together, no one could say exactly when, things began to go wrong between King Sigert and Queen Brissault. Petty quarrels swelled into full-blown arguments. Familiar mannerisms became irritants. Casual phrases elicited barbed responses. Angry silences sometimes lasted for days, and only a state occasion would have Sigert and Brissault speaking to one another again, albeit coolly and formally.

Sigert, who still loved his wife deeply, tried to figure out where things had gone wrong. He could not. He consulted his counselors and advisors and the wisest men in the kingdom, and while they were able to suggest a number of causes, they could not agree on a solution. They were in accord on war, taxes, and ceremonials, but not on domestic relations. Some said that women required flattery; others prescribed extravagant gifts, separate palaces, or beheading. In the end, they were no help.

Unknown to the king, Brissault, who loved her husband every bit as much as he loved her, was following the same course, except that she was consulting with wise women. But they were no more help than the wise men. A venerable nun told her that men at any age were still small boys in many ways — a fact she well knew. One learned woman suggested aloofness, another submission, a third poison. No one offered advice that she found acceptable.

A year passed, and then another, and the domestic tension remained unresolved. One winter morning, after particularly sharp words over breakfast, Sigert wandered through the palace deep in gloomy thought. Muttering under his breath, he trudged aimlessly up flights of stairs and paced down corridors long unvisited. Eventually he found himself standing before a familiar door. Lost in his brooding, he had come to his old nursery. Memory bade him enter. The chamber faced the east, and the

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early sunlight gave it a cheerful air. The bright pictures on the walls, the toys that lay scattered at random, and the old story books aroused a pleasant nostalgia.

He picked up a dusty book of tales that lay nearby and settled in the window seat where he had spent so many happy childhood hours. Leafing through the book, he came upon the story of the magic mirror. It had been one of his favorites, and he read it once again, hoping to recapture some of the innocent wonder of those days. He paused after completing it, cried out in gratitude, and immediately reread it. After the second reading, he hugged the book to his breast and laughed aloud. Here was the solution. He would give Brissault a mirror as a birthday present, a magic mirror that would make her appear forever young and beautiful. Such a rare and encouraging gift would demonstrate the feelings he could not seem to express otherwise. She would be happy again. Their quarreling would end and they would be reconciled forever.

Having no knowledge of magic himself, he summoned Kedrigern, who had worked effective and timely spells for his father, and for himself in his youth, and entrusted the work of finding and acquiring the mirror to him. While at the castle, Kedrigern had picked up another assignment. He was pleased to be wrapping both up with a single journey.

As time ran on, Sigert grew uneasy. When Kedrigern presented himself at the castle on the very morning of Brissault's birthday to announce that the mirror awaited their majesties' pleasure, the king was elated.

"Where is it?" he asked.

"I've had it placed in the queen's bedchamber, Your Majesty," said the wizard.

"Her Majesty is in the great hall right now, accepting a present from the Goldsmiths' guild. The Saddlers are arriving after them, and then the Fishmongers. Her Majesty always bathes and changes her clothes after a meeting with the Fishmongers." Sigert paused to do some mental calculation. "We've got about an hour. Let's go and inspect this mirror," he said, rising.

The mirror stood in the center of the queen's bedchamber. It was very tall, rising from a massive silver base inlaid with precious stones. It was covered with a richly embroidered cloth.

"Remove the cloth. We want to see the mirror," said the king.

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Kedrigern dismissed the servants, then removed the heavy cloth himself. It took a bit of effort.

"Why didn't you have the servants do that?" Sigert asked.

"Just a precaution, Your Majesty. I don't want them looking into the mirror until I've had a chance to test it out."

Sigert took a step back, away from the mirror. "Have you brought a dangerous object into this palace without testing it?"

"I've checked it for curses and trick spells, Your Majesty. I can assure you that it's perfectly safe."

Sigert looked relieved. "That's better. What else do you have to do before we can use it?"

"Well, I know it talks. I have to determine whether it has other powers, and if it does, which ones we want to utilize. The man who sold me the mirror didn't know much about it. He wasn't even certain that it was magic, but I could tell right away."

The king looked less relieved. "Could it be dangerous?"

"Not dangerous, Your Majesty. At worst it might be...." Kedrigern paused to search for a less alarming term and at last said, "Unpredictable. Tricky. Surprising."

"We do not like surprises in our palace," said Sigert, frowning. "We want nothing untoward to happen to Her Majesty."

"There is no danger, I assure you, Your Majesty."

The king pondered. Over the years, besides putting on weight, Sigert had become pompous and self-important, but he was no more so than other kings, and less so than many. He really did love Brissault, and wanted to make her happy once again. He lacked not good will, but comprehension. He simply could not understand how a woman married to him and reigning at his side could be unhappy.

He studied the mirror, extending a hand to touch the frame but stopping short of actual contact. He concealed his hesitation under a spacious gesture and said, "It's nicely made. We like all those little cherubs and ribbons and bands of flowers."

"Exquisite, isn't it? You don't often get that kind of workmanship in a magic mirror. People seem to think that if it's magic, it doesn't have to look good," Kedrigern said, frowning at the thought of such an unprofessional attitude.

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Sigert ventured a quick peek into the mirror. He turned to the wizard, frowning. "The glass is foggy. Are you sure you got a good mirror?"

"Oh, it's perfectly fine, Your Majesty. There's a small spell on it, to discourage the idle and the curious."

"Well, get it off, so Her Majesty can use the thing."

Kedrigern murmured a few words and moved his hands in an intricate gesture. The glass cleared. King and wizard saw their reflections.

"Looks good to us. What powers do you think it has?"

"First and foremost, it's a speaking mirror." Raising his hands and gesturing, purely for dramatic effect, Kedrigern said to the mirror, "Speak to me, mirror."

A shimmer ran over the reflections. The thin silvery voice said, "Speak to you?"

"Yes, speak. You're a talking mirror."

"A talking mirror," the mirror said.

"Tell us a story," said the king.

"A story?" repeated the mirror.

"Yes, do that."

"I'll do that."

"And don't repeat everything we say," said the king.

The mirror was silent for a time, as if rehearsing. Then, with another shimmer over the reflected figures, it began to speak. "Once there were three bears, Papa Bear, Mama Bear, and Baby Bear, and they lived in a house in the woods. A little girl named Goldilocks was — "

"Is that the best you can do?" the king interrupted.

"Best I can do," said the mirror.

"You're repeating again," Kedrigern said.

After a pause, the mirror said, with manifest effort, "I am a mirror. That's what I'm supposed to do."

"We find it annoying. Stop it this minute," said the king. "Do you hear? That is a royal command. Stop repeating. Be original."

Their images wavered and dissolved. For a moment, the glass was entirely empty; then new images appeared. Sigert screamed, staggered back, and covered his eyes. Kedrigern blanked the mirror with a quick emergency spell and steadied himself against a chair. He took a few deep breaths to calm his nausea. The king peeked out at him from between his

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fingers, then pointed to the mirror. "What were those things in there?" he said in a strained whisper. "Can they get out?"

"No danger of that, Your Majesty. They're imaginary."

"What kind of imagination could conjure up monstrosities like those?" said the king, shuddering.

"The mirror's. It was obeying your command."

"Our command?" the king cried, going pale.

"Your Majesty told it to be original."

"We did not command it to terrify us. If it tries anything like that ever again, we will have it smashed to smithereens. Does it understand?"

Kedrigern observed the tremulous patterns on the darkened face of the mirror. "It does, Your Majesty."

Sigert stood arms akimbo, looking hard at the mirror. "We begin to doubt that this was a good idea," he said. "It might be best to smash the thing anyway. Magic mirrors are too tricky for our liking."

"Trickiness is their nature, Your Majesty."

"And yet it is a unique object, and we do not wish to give it up."

"Not many of these around, Your Majesty. This may be the only one in existence. It would be a shame to have to destroy it."

The mirror was by this time displaying a dazzling pattern of swirls and zigzags, and the frame could be seen to tremble ever so slightly. In a subdued voice, it said, "I will obey Your Majesty to the best of my ability. Please do not smash me."

King and wizard exchanged a glance. The king said, "No more fits of creativity. Is that understood?"

"Understood, Your Majesty."

"Shall I clear it now?" Kedrigern asked.

Sigert nodded in assent, and Kedrigern removed the spell. Their reflections appeared.

"Very well, mirror. What else can you do?" Sigert said.

"Aside from what you saw, I can only speak and reflect."

The king looked disappointed. "Can't you make our wife look young and beautiful? We thought you magic mirrors did things like that."

"A common misconception. We cannot, Your Majesty."

The king sighed. "A pity. Her Majesty has been unhappy of late, and we believe that we know the cause. She has always been the fairest in the

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land, but lately she's been hearing talk of beautiful young princesses in the neighboring kingdoms, and we think that is upsetting her. Making her feel old. Women don't like that. They want to look young and beautiful all their lives," said the king, confidently repeating what several wise men had told him. "A magic mirror that attests to her unfading beauty would do a lot to cheer her up."

"Her Majesty is still a beautiful woman," said Kedrigern.

"Unfortunately, she's excessively self-critical. Always finding little things wrong with her hair or her dress. Wrinkles around the eyes. That sort of thing. We try to be helpful, but we don't seem to do much good. Can't you touch up her image somehow, mirror?"

"I am only a talking mirror. Transformation is not within my power, Your Majesty."

The king sighed again. The mirror was silent. Abruptly, Kedrigern laughed aloud and began to rub his hands together energetically. "No need to worry. I've got the solution," he said.

"You have?" king and mirror asked with one astonished voice.

"I have. Can you memorize a few lines very quickly, mirror?"

"Exact replication is my forte."

"Good. Her Majesty will be here soon. No time to waste."

The wizard rushed to the queen's dressing table, where he copied something onto a scrap of parchment. He then scribbled something else on another scrap, which he tucked into his sleeve. With a conspiratorial grin for the king, he read the first piece to the mirror. They rehearsed for a few minutes, until Brissault was heard entering the bedchamber.

The queen seemed in a good humor. Seeing Sigert and the wizard and the mirror, she gave a little exclamation of surprise and delight. "A birthday present! For me! Oh, what a lovely mirror! Such an exquisite frame! Sigert, you're a dear, generous man!" she cried.

"This is no ordinary mirror," said the king.

"It's a magic mirror! Isn't it a magic mirror? Just what I've always wanted! Oh, that's so sweet of you!" she said, kissing Sigert on the cheek.

"We're glad you like it," he said.

They hugged, and she kissed him again. "You can be so thoughtful when you really try. But it's all cloudy. I can't see myself in it."

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"If Your Majesty will simply repeat this phrase while standing before the mirror," said Kedrigern, handing her the slip of parchment which he had concealed in his sleeve.

She took the parchment, studied it, and said, "Mirror, mirror, standing there, tell me truly: am I fair?"

Lights flickered deep within the mirror. Colors blazed and swooped and curled in diminishing loops, spiraling toward the center, growing ever fainter until finally they cleared and only the queen's reflection showed. From within the glass a deep voice said, "Happily I do my duty: hail to thee, world's reigning beauty!"

"World's reigning beauty? Does that mean that I'm the fairest of them all?" Brissault cried.

"What you see is clearly true: no one's half as fair as you," said the mirror.

Delighted, the queen turned to the king. "Is it really so?" she asked.

He shrugged and said, "We have never known a mirror to lie."

She embraced him, kissed him, and withdrew to her dressing room. At the doorway she turned and said, "Wizard, I would have you stay to instruct me in the properties of this wonderful gift."

Sigert looked smugly at Kedrigern and at their images in the mirror. When the door had closed behind Brissault, and he was certain that she was out of earshot, the king said, "We think we handled that rather well."

"Let's see what the mirror thinks." Turning to the mirror, Kedrigern said, "Tell us, mirror: are we clever?"

In reverent tones, the mirror said, "King and wizard, are you ever! Brilliant king and brilliant mage, keenest thinkers of the age!"

The king winked at the wizard, who returned the wink. Sigert cocked his crown at a jaunty angle and swaggered from the queen's bedchamber looking very pleased with himself.

In a little while Brissault reentered the room. She looked around to make absolutely certain that she and the wizard were alone, locked the door, and went to the mirror. She folded her arms, and in a stern no-nonsense voice said, "All right, mirror, let's have the truth."

"The truth?"

"Your Majesty—" Kedrigern cried in alarm, but she cut him short with a gesture and said, "Stay out of this. Come on, mirror. Cut the flattery."

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"Flattery?"

"And stop repeating everything I say. Come on, out with it."

The mirror ran through a rainbow of color, then cleared. "The truth. Very well. Your Majesty is twenty-two pounds overweight and badly needs a new hairdresser. And that gown... I wouldn't wrap a dead dog in that to bury it."

The queen stood silent, tapping her foot. She turned to Kedrigern, who shrugged helplessly. "Mirrors can't lie, Your Majesty."

"Oh, can't they? What was all that about 'world's reigning beauty'?"

"Your Majesty is a very beautiful — "

"I've seen my best years, Kedrigern. I'm holding up well, but I'm no longer the world's great beauty. So why did the mirror say so?"

Looking sheepish, Kedrigern said, "Poetic license. As long as it spoke in rhyme...."

"Very ingenious. But remember, you're working for me as well as for Sigert."

Brissault studied her image. After a long and thoughtful pause, she said, "You're right about the gown, mirror. Sigert picked it out, and he has no sense of color. And I've never been completely satisfied with the Royal Hairdresser. But twenty-two pounds?!"

"Your Majesty would look trim if she lost fifteen. But she would look svelte if she lost twenty-two. Trust me."

"Svelte is unnecessary. Trim will do. But I am in no hurry. His Majesty thinks I wish to look like a sixteen-year-old princess. His Majesty is wrong." The mirror shimmered discreetly and said nothing. Brissault went on, "I will have my favorite dresses brought out, and you will tell me frankly how I look in them. I will also try a few new hairdos that I have seen in recent months. And I will cut out pastries at breakfast and have only light sauces with dinner. You will inform me when I am trim."

"As Your Majesty commands," said the mirror.

"And if His Majesty should ask, tell him I'm delighted to know that I am the fairest in the land. And tell him that he's the kindest and most thoughtful of kings. He'll expect to hear that," said the queen.

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"And now you can go to sleep, or do whatever you magic things do when you're not doing magic things," said Brissault. "Kedrigern, you did

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well. I think this mirror can help solve our problems. Now cover it over. We have private business." When the mirror was obscured, she said, "Did you get the ring?"

From inside his tunic Kedrigern drew forth a small black box. He unlocked and opened it, and placed it in her hands. She looked wistfully on the glittering quincunx of two rubies, two emeralds, and a single diamond, identically cut.

"It would have made such a lovely anniversary present," she said with a sigh.

"The decision is up to you, Your Majesty. I took it on approval."

She gazed on the ring for a long time, then shook her head. "No. It won't do. Sigert is a good man and means well, but he doesn't understand women and probably never will."

She took up the ring, turning it, watching the light that flashed from its facets and glowed in its heart. It was a beautiful piece of work, but its value lay not in beauty alone.

"Perhaps the Ring of Insight will change him," Kedrigern suggested. "It confers perception on the wearer."

"Too much perception. With this ring on his finger, Sigert could not be deceived. Isn't that so?"

"That is the virtue of the ring, Your Majesty."

Brissault sighed again, a deeper, sadder sigh. When she learned of the Ring of Insight some years ago it had seemed the perfect gift, an expression of faith and trust that would make her feelings clear to Sigert as words could not, and restore their old relationship. When Kedrigern had informed her that the ring might be available, she had instructed him to acquire it whatever the cost. Now she saw that it was simply not possible to give Sigert the ring. Someday, perhaps; but not yet.

"Sigert will be better off with a present of a nice new set of robes. Something warm and comfortable, with his favorite motif of forget-me-not and dragon worked in gold on the pockets. And a nice pair of matching slippers to wear around the palace in the evening."

"Thoughtful gifts, Your Majesty. And very useful."

"Take back the ring, Kedrigern."

"Have you no wish to wear it yourself?"

"Never. And if you're sensible, you'll not slip it on your finger."

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Kedrigern smiled. "I don't plan to, Your Majesty."

"Very wise of you. Sigert's a good man at heart, and we love one another. We have our little differences, but all things considered, he's been a decent husband." She paused, then added, "And our chances of happiness together will be much improved if we both retain the ability to be deceived now and then." ☙

SPECULATIONS
AIEE!
CALLER ERADICATION LEADS TO THE EXTINCTION OF TELEMARKETERS, THE JERKY BOYS, AND OLD, ALCOHOLIC, COLLEGE FRIENDS.
Wong

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FORGOTTEN TREASURES

MIKE RESNICK

HERE WE ARE, back for another look at some of our field's forgotten treasures. The standard recitation of this column's purpose: every one of these books had one or more paperback editions, and should be available for a pittance or two in your local paperback resale shop or the dealer's room of any science fiction convention.

The art of the parody is all but lost in these serious-minded days. So perhaps I should tell you about one of the finest parodies ever to appear in the field, Harry Harrison's hilarious *Star Smashers of the Galaxy Rangers*. We're not looking at subtlety here, gang — this is a turkey shoot, taking aim at every plot device and nuance of E. E. "Doc" Smith's Lensman and Skylark books in particular, and at old-fashioned space opera in general.

Chuck and Jerry, a pair of college students, find that they can exceed the speed of light by powering the football team's airplane with "cheddite" — an electrified piece of cheddar cheese — and off they go to right all the galactic wrongs. Of course they're accompanied by pert, pretty, perky Sally.

I know people love Harry's Stainless Steel Rat and Bill the Galactic Hero books, and so do I, but take my word for it: this is his funniest.

There is a literary form, all but forgotten these days, formally known as the vignette and more familiarly as the short-short. Basically, it's a story of less than 1,000 words, and one man made it his private domain: the late Frederic Brown. I suppose at one time or another, we've all written a cute one-punch story of 700 words or so, but only Brown was able to do it month in and month out. And these were not "Feghoots," three pages setting up a terrible pun. No, indeed — they were honest-to-ghod science fiction stories.

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The best of them were collected in *Nightmares and Geezenstacks*. I counted thirty-seven stories in the first sixty pages, after which I stopped counting and just concentrated on re-reading old favorites. (He also included a few normal-length stories, just to prove he could do it.)

Brown was actually better known for his mysteries than his science fiction, but to this day, no one has ever come close to de-throning him as the King of the Short-Short. This book will show you why.

Readers of this column know that the late C. L. Moore is one of my favorite writers. Her Northwest Smith and Jirel of Joiry stories are classics of their type, and she was also able to produce truly brilliant works of art such as "Vintage Season."

I'd like to tell you about one of her less well-known books. It's called *Judgment Night*, and it's sort of a transition between her early days as a *Weird Tales* fantasy specialist and her later career, in collaboration with her husband Henry Kuttner, as a creator of highly polished, fast-paced science fiction.

Every pulp writer referred to "pleasure planets" — but only Catherine Moore created one that was worthy of the title: "Cyrille, where beauty and terror were blended for the delectation of those who loved nightmares." It's the world where much of *Judgment Night* takes place.

And, in an era when girls in science fiction stories were just lumpy boys, fit only for holding the equivalent of the hero's horse, Moore created yet another powerful, competent woman, fully the equal of Jirel — the memorable Juille, who rebels against a rebellion.

Time to recommend a matched pair of books, since they're by the same author and about the same subject: the People.

The author is Zenna Henderson, and the two books are *Pilgrimage: The Book of the People* and *The People: No Different Flesh*.

The People are aliens, refugees with psi powers who have been hiding in the Southwest for more than half a century. Like Clifford Simak and James White, Henderson believes in the decency of all sentient beings, and her worldview seems to place her foursquare on the side of gentleness.

There are strong Christian and Biblical themes in the People stories,

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but they're never intrusive, and the stories differ from most "feel-good" tales in that they deal with some serious problems and make some serious statements.

There was a pretty dreadful TV movie about the People some years back. If you saw it, then you probably (and understandably) avoided the books. Trust me, the books are a few levels of magnitude superior to the film. They are classics of their type, and it's a type that appears all too infrequently these days.

The ultimate hard science fiction novel? I think most people would say it was Hal Clement's *Mission of Gravity*, and that book is certainly a fine example of the form, but my vote goes to Poul Anderson's *Tau Zero*.

Poul is equally at home with all facets of imaginative literature — science fiction, fantasy, myth — but to me, *Tau Zero* is his masterpiece.

A spaceship has an accident: its braking system won't work. Simple as that. Well, not that simple, as Einstein's equations make clear: as its speed approaches that of light (no, it never quite equals it), subjective time slows down to a crawl, and at the same time the ship becomes more and more massive. (Remember? As your speed approaches that of light, your mass approaches infinity.) Entire galaxies are crossed in what seems, subjectively, to be fractions of a second. The ship grows more massive than a neutron star. The crew is alive billions of years after their loved ones have turned to dust. And still they can't slow down.

A few decades ago, when *2001: A Space Odyssey* first came out, there was a point in the movie — the so-called "light show" — where all the kids (and the science fiction readers) left their seats and walked up to sit on the floor, as close to the screen as they could get.

This book will produce the same mind-boggling effects with words instead of celluloid pictures.

Not all post-holocaust novels have to be about barbarism, nor need they be bitter reflections on what might have been. Unquestionably the most beautiful of them all is George Stewart's *Earth Abides*.

A plague has killed off most of humanity. The focus is on one of the few survivors, Isherwood Williams, who wanders the empty landscape, observing the ghost towns, befriending a dog, finally finding another survivor and taking her for a wife.

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They have children, and while he tries to teach his offspring about the glory that was Earth, they are more interested in learning survival skills to help them live on what Earth has become. Eventually, as an old man, he is almost worshipped by all those who came after the plague, but none of them understand the past that he constantly babbles about. He finally comes to the realization that his tribe of children and grandchildren have formed a hunter-gatherer tribe not unlike the American Indians of pre-plague days, and that the planet has come full cycle — that "men go and come, but Earth abides."

A beautiful book, one that should never be allowed to go out of print.

Sanford Kvass is a science fiction writer, preparing to go to Worldcon. Three aliens pay him a visit and offer him a challenge: if he can pass their test, they'll decide Men are a competent and gritty little race and leave us alone; if he fails, they'll tear the planet down and build a highway in its place.

The test: there will be an alien — in disguise — at the Worldcon. All Kvass has to do is identify him.

This is the premise of *Gather in the Hall of the Planets*, one of the funniest and most caustic novels of the past thirty years. It was originally part of an Ace Double, and the author's name is listed as K. M. O'Donnell, but it's none other than Barry Malzberg, doubtless writing the book as therapy after the shock of attending his first Worldcon.

The problem, of course, is not how to spot an alien at a gathering of science fiction writers and fans, but rather how to spot a normal human being. In the process, Barry, with devastating skill, created a properly crazed cast of characters and caricatures, each drawn from a real science fiction writer or fan, that had everyone in the field guessing who was who for months after the book's first appearance.

I've heard Malzberg referred to as morbid. To which I reply — and this book will prove — there is a huge difference between morbid and mordant.

If Alfred Bester and Ray Bradbury were the field's most influential short story writers in the 1950s, a case can be made that their closest competitor was Cyril M. Kornbluth, who turned out one well-crafted and cynical story after another.

Some of his best were collected in *The Marching Morons and other*

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famous science fiction stories, and though they were written four decades ago, most of them hold up splendidly. The title story, one of Kornbluth's two most famous — the other, not in this collection, is "The Little Black Bag" — seems to have *more* meaning today, rather than less. In this day and age, when test scores have fallen at every grade level, when only one out of seven American students can even identify his home state on a map, when the average American spends more time watching television than eating or even sleeping, when millions of people doubt that the Holocaust actually happened and millions more don't believe Neil Armstrong really walked on the Moon...well, "The Marching Morons" doesn't seem all that far-fetched.

The premise is that, as society grows dumber and dumber, the few competent men and women will be forced to work around the clock just to feed and care for the "marching morons." Not as unlikely as it once was, is it?

The other stories, while less famous, are equally hard-hitting. Kornbluth was not a writer who was concerned with making his audience feel comfortable about things.

* * *

There are a few writers who are so unique that they have no standard reference points. R. A. Lafferty is one; if you like his writing, go buy more of his books, because he's not remotely like anyone else.

Another such writer is the late Italo Calvino. His first work of science fiction, *Cosmicomics,* is brilliant, funny, thought-provoking, and (I guarantee) not like anything else you are ever likely to read.

Cosmicomics is a loosely connected series of stories narrated by Qfwfq, who relates the origin of the universe, the creation of life, the death of the dinosaurs, what Cleopatra was really like, and what it was like to fall through trillions of miles of space in the sensual company of Ursula H'x.

Weird. Delightful. Strange. Hilarious. And above all, *unique.*

An author who was forgotten too quickly was the late James Schmitz, who wrote two very popular series, the tales of the Hub and the stories of Telzey Amberdon, an adolescent girl who happens to be a telepath.

His best book, though — and surely his most famous — doesn't involve either of his two ongoing series. It is *The Witches of Karres,* and it concerns the absolutely

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charming adventures of a normal human being, Captain Pausert, and three young girls who possess psi powers. (Yes, the book originally appeared in John Campbell's *Astounding*, back when he was urging everyone to write psi stories, an obsession that might have worked out better if they all could have written like Schmitz.)

The witches themselves — Goth, Maleen, and the Leewit — are among the most delightful teenagers ever created in science fiction. Enjoy.

The late Manly Wade Wellman began his career as a pulp hack and ended it as an acknowledged artist.

What made the difference?

John did. John, also known as John the Balladeer or Silver John. The focus of Wellman's very best work, a series of fantasy stories — regional folk tales, really — set in the Appalachians, *Who Fears the Devil*? follows Silver John as he makes his way through the mountain country, confronting supernatural evil.

Wellman knew the dialog, knew the myths and beliefs of the area, knew how to create exactly the kind of flavor these yarns needed. A more recent paperback, *John the Balladeer*, contains all the stories that were in the original, plus six more Wellman wrote toward the end of his life.

The Silver John stories are simple but never simplistic, evocative of an era and a way of life that no longer exists, and display a contagious love for their characters.

That's it for this issue. Good luck treasure hunting.

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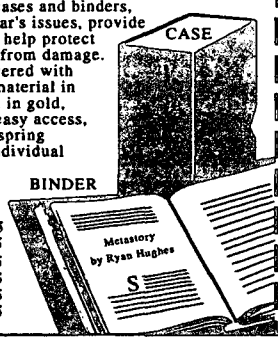

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*In his youth, Tennessee Williams was something of a science fiction fan—*Astounding *published a letter he sent to the editor while he was a teen. So the notion of blending Williams's work with Cyril Kornbluth's "The Marching Morons" isn't as absurd as it might initially seem. Indeed, as the following grim story testifies, this hybrid can be rather poignant.*

Stefano Donati lives in Bennington, Vermont, and notes that his literary hero is Ellison...but he does not say whether he means Harlan or Ralph. Perhaps there's another literary cross-breed in the offing!

The Last of the Glass Menageries

By Stefano Donati

THAT NIGHT, HE TRIED TO tell his sister she was dying. He sat her on the *Peanuts* bedspread she'd favored ever since leaving school, and he fetched the tattered polar bear from her dresser. "Esther, you know how you're going to have a baby, right?"

"Oh, yes." She nodded happily, over and over, spilling drool onto her sweater. With a Kleenex he wiped it off. A reflex gesture, as instinctive as his anguish whenever some smart teenager flung names at her.

"And do you know what that means?"

"It means I'll be a mommy." Her voice stretched so exuberantly on that last word, he almost feared her vocal chords would snap.

"Dennis." A sweet whisper from behind him. He gazed up and found his wife Delia, hair golden and perfect. She motioned him toward the door. "No sense making her all terrified; let's wait until she starts getting weaker."

Dennis shuddered at the memory of Esther's words from that October

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morning: "Me and Petey did more than kiss last night. Did better." Spoken with such joy, she'd missed the horror on his and Delia's faces.

He tried now not to picture her death growing ever nearer. Sexdeath, pouncing on her happy innocence, burrowing inside her.

"Need toys for baby," Esther said.

More drool. Out came the Kleenex, and he went to her. "The baby won't get here right away, though, honey." Dennis stroked his sister's hair. *You won't be dying right away.*

Suddenly afraid for her, afraid of tears, he rushed into the other bedroom. Delia followed him, leaving Esther babbling merrily to Frosty the polar bear.

"Esther and Petey," he said. "I envy them. It's crazy."

"No. It's normal." Delia stood away from him, as if struggling to squelch her own desire. Could it possibly be as intense as his? "Maybe we should cut off all our hair. Get fat, take bad-breath pills. That's what the Bonsers did for each other. Mary told me they haven't aroused each other in months."

"It wouldn't work. You could weigh two hundred, and I'd feel the same." He saw her flattered blush, and his throat freed the next words. "Delia, there's something I've never told you."

"Keeping secrets, huh?" Her eyes sparkled. "For shame."

"Sometimes, when I can't stop thinking what it would be like to make love with you..."

"...You wish you'd never met me."

"Yes. Sometimes."

"Well, I feel the same way about you. I want to make love, too, you know." She slid her palm beneath his, dangerously. The touch aroused him, frightened him. He could almost see Sexdeath as a thinking captor, mocking all these yearnings, daring him and Delia to dig themselves an early grave through just one night of passion.

But he knew a thinking captor would forgive one lapse. Just one. Especially a lapse by Esther.

"Delia, why did you ever consent to date me? Half the people on campus swore off love completely."

"Finders, keepers."

Humming from the other room. Esther, soothing her beloved Frosty.

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"Pop-Plus orchestrated everything," he said. "I'm sure of it. That dance at the lodge: they must have guided Esther and Petey inside that washroom." He saw his rage reflected in Delia's eyes as, wordlessly, helplessly, she nodded. Somebody had to have body sex, after all; somebody had to produce the world's children. And lacking restless martyrs, one could always persuade people like Esther and Petey.

Obscene.

Bitterly, Dennis thought about his students, how more and more of them had to labor over even the simplest of multiplication problems.

Saving the future, birth by birth.

Remember: retarded people can have bright children.

Clever Pop-Plus mottos, he conceded, but the cold, hard math ran through his brain. A scant few bright children for every twenty dim ones.

Foot soldiers, he thought. Esther, and Petey, and everybody like them. Exploited foot soldiers in the fight to keep humanity alive.

BRIDGEPORT FATHER, 30, IS THE LATEST TO BE DECLARED A MIRACLE

Dennis dared not hope. But he scrolled down the headline:

Two years ago, Allen and Miranda Simmons of Bridgeport defied the Sexdeath virus. They bravely made love, and soon Miranda was pregnant. Over the next several weeks, they arranged to make Allen's brother the adoptive father, and by her second trimester Miranda already felt the swollen blotches of the virus on her skin. She died five weeks after delivering her baby boy.

But Allen Simmons is still alive. And shows no symptoms whatsoever of the Sexdeath virus. Yesterday, precisely one year after becoming a father, he was officially declared a Miracle — the sixth in Fairfield County this decade. He has asked his brother to relinquish custodial rights, and

The clattering at the door persisted until Dennis answered.

"William Burnham," said the heavy, white-haired man. "From Population Plus. I'm here to negotiate the reward for Esther Trossi's pregnancy."

"Go away. We don't want your blood money."

"What are you talking about?"

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"We didn't mean for my sister to have body sex. Your people lured her into it."

Burnham acted properly offended. "That'd be a sort of murder. We always let the participants and their families decide."

"She has Down's Syndrome. What the hell can she decide?"

"We're trying to save humanity."

"So I keep hearing. Use artificial insem."

"You don't follow the news too closely, do you, Mr. Trossi?"

"The bombings. Yes, I know. Well, my apologies to all the sperm banks, but the terrorists do have a point. This virus is our chance to just die as a species, and the world sure wouldn't miss us."

"People who worked in those labs were killed."

"A very few. But since the terrorists want Mother Earth saved and humanity dead, or at least diminished, why do you think individual scientists should concern them? You might not agree with them, Burnham, but don't quibble with their logic."

"You're on their side."

"I'm on my sister's side."

"All right. Legally, what we're offering belongs to her. She'll bequeath it to you. If you deny me access to her, you could go to jail."

Dennis glared, but finally went to fetch her from her bedroom, where some ancient sitcom's laughtrack was making her giggle along. Her way of feeling a part of things.

"Esther, honey, a man is here to talk with us."

A man. A woman. Never a Pop-Plus agent. Never a doctor. Nuances just confused her. All these years, thought Dennis, and I still go back and forth from loving her to wishing she'd never been born. Wishing I could just abandon her, the way any sensible half-brother would.

In the dinette, Burnham grimaced at the sight of Esther propping Frosty on the table. "Going to have a baby," she said.

Burnham jerked his massive body toward Dennis. "Only one? You don't plan to have the embryo doubled?"

"We're not out to help you replenish the population."

"But the reward depends on that."

"The blood money, you mean. We'll manage without it."

How? On his and Delia's meager incomes, how? The delivery, the

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overnight care, and then the years of adoptive parenting. Without this hideous "reward," they could never pay for all of it.

Burnham sat forward, in full salesman mode. "My offer is five thousand for a doubling. Fifteen thousand for a tripling. Either way, it should cover the cost of parenting after Esther's gone."

"Where Esther gone? Where I go?" She slapped her glass of water to the floor.

Burnham stared at Dennis. "You haven't even explained it to her, have you?" Before Dennis could answer, he said, "Don't bother. I'm used to this; let me."

No. Couldn't allow that. "Esther..."

From Dennis's mere tone, she looked forlornly up at him. Just like when Mr. Halverfore found out who'd stained his rug or when no one came to her birthday party or when their adoptive mother died.

While Dennis searched for the gentlest words, Burnham said, "One day, Esther, when you fall asleep it'll be permanent."

"Pertamet?"

Dennis shook with fury. "Forever and ever," he said.

"But what for baby?" She began to shriek. "Not ever and ever for baby, Dennis?"

"Dee and I will take good care of it." He eyed Burnham. "With our own money."

Outside, Dennis felt a card thrust into his hand. "If you change your mind, just beep me."

"Burnham, I teach math. You know what one of my students told me? That sometime this spring, your people gave her family ten thousand marks to have body sex with a classmate. Any classmate. It would have been forty thousand if she'd gotten pregnant."

"Don't be jealous. She must be very smart, good genes."

"Not what I meant." Dennis dreamt of pummeling this guy's arrogance right out of him. "You know what families know: that a teenager's lusts are boiling anyway, and sometimes teenagers can be annoying, and besides they're just some niece or nephew or adoptee. But conception or not, Burnham, body sex is fatal. *Every time*, except for Miracles. So tell me: if I offered your relatives enough money, would you have the guts?"

"I'd consider it."

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"You'd consider it. What about the people like my sister? They can't consider things. They don't know how."

"You never warned her, did you? You never even warned her away from sex."

"Only about a million times." Dennis cursed himself, and almost Delia, for having made the diagrams so abstract. Red for poisoned sperm and blue for poisoned eggs and black for when they came together. What could Esther understand of that? She'd only nodded to please them, to make them proud of her. All she'd grasped, if anything, was that their strange lectures embarrassed them. Their stuttering, the fumbled crayons.

And they'd too easily convinced themselves that she'd absorbed their warnings.

He sent Burnham off and rushed back inside.

"Baby needs me," Esther kept saying, and he held her, unable to calm her, unable to quite ask if she understood just what being asleep forever and ever meant.

THE ADOPTIVE PARENTS sat by the bed, the mother solemn and the father drained. Dennis moved toward the near side, across from them. The mottling had reached young Judy's face. She couldn't be weighing even eighty now.

"Mr. Trossi."

"How are you coping, Judy?"

"Not dead yet."

He wished for just one more correct solution or eagerly raised hand. Hardly his best student in Algebra B, but the smartest to be lured into Sexdeath. And from her love of Dixieland, and the copy of *The Corn Is Green* he'd once seen her reading in the park, he could tell she'd shone bright in other ways. Before this greedy couple had played on her need for their approval. Getting Sexdeath might have won her that, if only she'd given them grandkids.

Leaning over her, he found himself almost glad she'd failed them; these monsters didn't deserve grandkids.

"Everyone from school says hi."

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"Why can't they visit me themselves?"

Always such directness. "Maybe they're afraid."

"It's 'cause I failed. No babies." Her eyes said *Aren't I right?* just as lightly as when she used to murmur answers during the Math-a-thons. Her next words caught on her throat before she finally pushed them out: "Rehearsals. Going well?"

"The kids are trying."

Blankness. She did not catch the double meaning; even last week, she might have. He sat with her, relieved that at least the adoptive parents did not attempt small talk with him.

Soon she issued a moan that slowly twisted into a high-pitched scream. Just a matter of days, now. The scream lasted impossibly long, and then came another. Dennis felt his temples burn, but forced himself to stay and listen. Come autumn he'd be here again, listening to Esther.

The parents didn't flinch. They were used to this by now. So were the staff, judging by the absence of approaching footsteps.

Dennis cringed, thinking of stories he'd heard about the way new parents react once their babies have emerged. How the brighter ones seem to glimpse the deaths awaiting them, the graves anxious to be dug. Heaven, set to welcome them. At least Esther would be spared that.

But when the blotches and the shrieks began, even having Frosty wouldn't help her.

"Mr. Trossi, when is your sister going to die?"

Dennis stepped toward the stage. "Probably in two or three months, Neil." The symptoms would be showing up soon. They'd have to. He couldn't dare hope otherwise.

"They say she's a Miracle. What's that?"

It awed Dennis to think that years ago, such puzzled innocence had been the domain of younger children. Keep adjusting downward, he thought. Just a bit more each year.

"Neil, don't dwell on my sister. Please. Now, later I want you to work on your enunciation..." Dennis caught himself. "The way you say things clearly or not clearly. 'Pleurosis.' That's what the Gentleman Caller says. First he says 'blue roses,' true, but then he says 'pleurosis.'"

"The Caller?"

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"The part you're playing."

"Oh. Right."

"But for now, no dialogue. Neil, Karalynn, practice the dance. The one the Caller and Laura do."

"Blecchh." The two of them together, racing to beat the other to a show of disgust.

"Come on, now. Brownies later if you get this right."

Neil said, "My aunt says never ask *anyone* to dance."

Another neurotic adult, thought Dennis. So intent on sparing a favored child from romance, from the slightest hint of anything that might lead to body sex. But the danger almost added spark. How shriveled his own world would have been if he had not, that winter morning freshman year, clumsily backed his tray into Delia's, sending lettuce and tomatoes flying. When instead of yelling at him she'd quietly helped him pick the food up, he knew his heart and life would never be simple again.

But now he considered Esther. "I guess your aunt's right. So maybe to be safe, just make sure neither of you enjoy this."

Neil and Karalynn both giggled, and timidly proceeded.

As Dennis watched, inhaling sawdust, he remembered how when he'd played this role a high-school actor was still expected to learn his lines, not amble about the stage with sheets of simplified, phonetically spelled dialogue. The memories made Dennis nostalgic in ways he suspected even Tennessee Williams could not have intended.

But all right. This might be the "Second Cast," but he would make their work match that of the Honors actors good old Kenster had kept for himself. Elements of it, anyway. "Very nice," he said, wincing. "Now, a tip about footwork..."

Neil brightened. "I forgot to tell you: my teacher said your sister's going to live."

Which teacher? Which brazen, dreamy colleague? "Neil. Shush."

"Is that why they want to study her?"

He and Delia wouldn't let them. They'd both stand guard against intruders first. No scary blood tests or geneprints or hours with some rude, condescending researcher.

"Neil. Let's get back to the play."

But still no symptoms. Maybe Esther *was* a Miracle. Like Allen

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Simmons of Bridgeport and the other lucky rarities. Maybe Heaven didn't want his sister yet. Maybe it would let him keep her.

"Why Frosty? Shouldn't the baby have a different name?"

"Frosty. I like Frosty."

Frosty wouldn't do. *Hey, you're the dumb lady who named her kid after her stuffed animal.* Frosty wouldn't do at all.

Dennis tried to ignore the stench. Did all newborns smell like this? "How about Judy?" Judy; even with the funeral receding, he would not forget. "You like that name, don't you? You like the name Judy." He knew if he told Esther enough times that she liked something, eventually she would.

She nodded. "Judy's good. Hold her, Dennis. Hold her, Dee."

She lifted the baby, which only made the wailing louder. As Delia helped him hold his niece gently yet securely, he forced himself to look at the eyes. The eyes. Like saucers. A whole face like a tiny Esther's.

Keep adjusting downward.

Delia started sobbing quietly. Eleven hours of labor, taking turns at clutching Esther's hand. Eleven hours of labor, and not even a healthy child.

"Why crying, Dee? Why tears?"

Delia forced a smile. "I'm just happy for you, Esther."

"I'm happy you're happy. Pretty baby."

Dennis kissed the tears off Delia's eyelids, and guided her into the waiting room, leaving Esther and little Judy to a pair of nurses.

"Dennis, when the symptoms start in on her, she'll be so afraid."

"Maybe they won't."

"She is not a Miracle. We can't be hoping yet."

"The symptoms would have shown up by now."

"Dennis, we can't prepare for both; for grief and joy." And then, as if her words of caution had raised her own hopes, Delia said, "Even if she is a Miracle, do you want reporters hounding her? Confusing the hell out of her?"

"No." He looked away. "I just don't want her to die."

He would not tell Esther about seeing her old boyfriend yesterday, stumbling in the check-out line, blotches all across his face.

From behind the door, they heard the low, familiar drone of Esther

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humming, this time to her newborn treasure, more wonderful even than Frosty.

Delia shook her head. "I just hope..."

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Delia. What?"

He caught the fear on her face. When she spun into a different topic, prattled on about the baby, he knew she was just trying to protect him from some horrid thought.

Maybe...

No.

Maybe Delia wanted Esther gone.

They moved back inside the nursery. Esther was rocking little Judy to sleep, more calmly and successfully than Dennis had dreamt she could manage. He watched over her, praying that if the baby suddenly annoyed her, the nurses could keep her from throwing it at the wall. If they failed, they'd berate her. Judy might be just one child instead of the customary two or three, but she was still the precious future. Esther, at least until she could be pronounced a Miracle, was just another dying mother.

FROM A BOOTH above the audience, Dennis controlled the lights for the premiere. Two more months and still no signs. Even if she died tomorrow, he would savor this: the sight of her in the seats below, the sound of her thirsty clapping. Clapping that began a split second after most everyone else's.

In the lobby afterwards, she ran to him. "Good movie," she said, her head bobbing up and down in happy spasms, making tiny Judy's face scrunch up. "Liked it, liked a lot." She couldn't possibly have liked it; he'd glimpsed her squirming, yawning from the First Act on. But she'd seen others praising him, and she loved him.

Esther.

"I'm glad," he said, and hugged her, wondering all over again what kind of person she'd have been without that extra chromosome. What hobbies would she have had? What opinions on the larger world would she have shared with him?

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She would need resilience, if ever that world did demand that she be studied just like Allen Simmons and the rest.

He asked Delia to drive her and the baby home. Then he climbed atop one of the lobby's chairs, and grew besieged with shouts of "Speech!" The cast stood beside him. The Gentleman Caller, now Neil Megsburg again, practically hyperventilated from all the attention.

When the applause began to surge, Dennis waved everyone to silence. "You're all wondering if Esther's a Miracle. I don't know and you don't need to. Meaning, no news crews, no science journalists, no buzz of any kind that might confuse her, make her worry that she's done something awful. Please. Maybe she'll start showing symptoms in an hour. Maybe never. But nobody's going to upset her."

His gathered friends all hushed, and slowly retreated toward the parking lot, their cars, and home. Neil Megsburg and his aunt stayed behind, and walked with him to his rusty sedan.

"The journalists will be here, Dennis. Can't stop that." The aunt's voice held a touch of pity. "But we'll fend them off as best we can. And because you turned down the Pop-Plus reward, we've formed a citizens coalition. Raised enough pledges to pay for the care of both the baby and Esther, however long she lives."

Dennis shut his eyes. They wouldn't be offering all this unless they wanted something big in return.

"We'll also pay for a trip now and then. To an aquarium, a holo show, the zoo. Esther likes the zoo, doesn't she, Dennis?" A hint of desperation had crept into Ms. Megsburg's voice.

"The terms, please."

In this woman he saw at least a shred of shame, something the Pop-Plus people never showed. "What we're thinking is, if your sister's a Miracle, maybe you are, too. The incidence is much, much higher in relatives."

"But still negligible."

"It's higher. And you, you're smart. A smart, healthy man who doesn't die when he has body sex — you could have bucketfuls of normal children."

"Not with Delia. She's a different sort of Miracle."

"Not with Delia. With other women. Start with her; impregnate her; then impregnate others."

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This was the threat Delia had foreseen, back in the hospital.

They might not allow him to say no. Since they weren't him, they could ignore how long the odds were. And ignore the prospect of his sister grieving. Delia dying.

Maybe his father, his and Esther's, was still alive. If Miracles did run in the family, then that hazy but looming memory might still be breathing. Nobody had ever located him.

"Dennis, just think of all the women you could have."

"How does zero sound?"

"Selfish. There are already ten in town, smart women, who are willing to martyr themselves for you. Improve the gene pool."

"By just a drop. I'm only one man."

"You'd be surprised. We looked it up. The record for paternity is held by this ancient emperor from Morocco: Moulay Ismail the Bloodthirsty. Eight hundred and eighty-eight kids. And that was before embryo doubling."

"Mr. Bloodthirsty was very unusual. And no doubt very tired. And probably had a press agent who fudged on the numbers."

"You're a teacher; you see the trend. Oh, there'll always be terminal cases and teenagers who think they're immortal and a few old, old men who suddenly get noble. But more and more, it's the retarded people who get martyred, who get coerced into sex. So what's ahead? Nobody wants to think about that, but I'll tell you. Each generation gets more stupid — that's already started. And before long the smart people will lose hope completely, and none of them at all will make the Sacrifice. Why bother? Then someday the last of the retarded caregivers is going to fail the last of the retarded children, and humanity will end."

"A lot of those retarded people will have smart children."

"A small minority. With not enough smart elders to sharpen their talents. Live in a stupid world, and most people will *become* stupid."

No more great plays, no more call for Laura Wingfields. Or for the beauty of a Bach cantata or a still-life painting. He did not want to see them die. By putting mostly bright kids in the mix, he could help prevent it.

"If I really am a Miracle."

"Your sister is."

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So far, he thought. So far.

"My sister also has Down's Syndrome. We're not the same."

"Maybe someday they'll isolate the virus, Dennis. Kill it, I don't know. But for now you have to try this. Other bright Miracles do."

"Then you don't need me."

"We need all the smart genes we can get."

"So that people like Esther can be shoved back into the background? Get scorned the way they used to be? What's unfolding is not all bad, Ms. Megsburg; with so many people being retarded, I wouldn't expect a world war any time soon."

"Don't be glib."

"And don't tell me about obligations. Not until you've taken care of somebody like Esther."

"I have; my nephew. Is it Esther you're worried about, or is it your life? I mean, you might not be immune after all."

Might not? These people probably suspected Jesus also had a messiah sibling.

What would Delia think? Delia, pregnant with his first children, weakening and semi-conscious. Dying. What would Delia think, picturing him with other women?

"Dennis, our offer stands: free medical care for your sister and her baby. Now, these women are willing to make the Sacrifice. Are you?"

Making love to Delia. Taking those timid caresses further, even for just the time before she died.

Delia, dead.

They'd have to decide together.

He moved to Neil, who stood shivering against his aunt's car trunk. "You made a fantastic final Gentleman Caller," Dennis said. He doubted Neil grasped the full meaning of "final." But "fantastic" was definitely understood.

"Thank...thank you, Mr. Trossi."

"The baby's asleep," Delia said, meeting him at the door. "And so is Esther. Temporarily."

"I should get to bed myself." His words prompted only a tired nod and no unease. They'd obviously not consulted her about their scheme.

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Perhaps they suspected her of being more loyal to her boyfriend than to humanity.

"Delia, when you looked so afraid in the hospital...now I know why. Guess what Neil Megsburg's aunt suggested to me tonight."

"I can imagine."

So wise, this woman whom his soul had chosen anguish with.

"Well," he asked, "what do you think of the idea?"

"Did they promise they'd take care of Esther?"

"Don't let that sway you."

"Dennis. Did they?"

"Better than we could ourselves. But I don't like the idea of her putting flowers on your grave. Or mine."

"Eventually, she'll forget me. Maybe even forget you."

Just as with our adoptive mom, thought Dennis. It's been years since Esther's even asked about her.

It calmed him to think that if he failed, if Sexdeath did indeed poison him, his sister would not miss him for long.

"Exactly how many women do they want you to kill?"

"Enough for eight hundred and eighty-nine kids, I think. That'd set the world's record."

He didn't want the world's record. He only wanted Delia. And he could see her wondering:

So many poets had extolled this poison. What did it taste like?

"Eight hundred and eighty-nine. Well, we'd better get you in training. Just don't enjoy it with any of them."

He couldn't. Not with Delia gone.

"I'm a little scared," he said.

"I'm more than a little. I'll bet even before Sexdeath, 'the first time' was a scary set of words."

"Maybe the thought of losing you will make me impotent."

"Then we'll just try again."

He wanted to. Oh, he wanted to. "Delia, are you absolutely sure the world's worth it?"

She took his hand. "The world isn't why I want to do this."

"But if I am a Miracle..." The word sounded so pretentious when applied to him. "If I am one, I'll have to grow old without you."

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"I'll be waiting."

Waiting? Up there? He'd never known her to believe in —

"On Earth, of course, I'm not so patient." She pressed a hearty kiss upon him, full and long.

Esther. They mustn't wake up Esther.

Soon, he and Delia might have to let the coalition watch them. Make sure he was honoring the agreement.

But not tonight. Tonight was theirs alone. He slid his arm around her waist and she played with his hair. They led each other into bed, and toward Heaven.

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Marina Fitch lives in Watsonville, California and writes to say that she took a part-time position at a rubber stamp company when she stopped by to purchase a stamp and got offered a job. If you'll forgive the pun, the experience obviously made an impression on her. Last year she published her first novel, The Seventh Heart, *a contemporary fantasy set in San Francisco. We're willing to wager our inkpad that she's currently working on a new novel.*

Imprints

By Marina Fitch

"WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE the cottage?" I asked, then winced. No way the milky-eyed woman across from me was going to see anything. "Sorry, I didn't — "

"It's all right, dear." Mrs. Grady smiled. She adjusted her upturned face so that for a moment I thought I must be wrong and she *could* see. "I'd love to. Your home has a real warmth. And it smells wonderful. Lavender, isn't it? And lemon?"

I nodded, then caught myself. "Yes. Lemon wax."

I'd polished the furniture that morning, to impress potential tenants. I glanced at my living room. The walnut coffee table gleamed, the periwinkle sofa was remarkably toy-free, the books in the dark bookshelves stood at attention, the glass hutch winked with the afternoon light. A bowl of dried lavender perched on the coffee table next to Mrs. Grady. I repressed a sigh. At least she could smell my good intentions.

But a blind tenant...what were the liabilities? The risks? Would she

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burn the place down trying to cook? Break a leg tripping over my seven-year-old's bicycle?

Well, no harm in showing her the place....

I rose. "The cottage is in the back."

But Mrs. Grady didn't stand. She leaned over and pulled her immense canvas bag closer, resting it against her leg. She reached in and pulled out a lap desk, then stirred the contents of the bag. Soft clunks and thumps accompanied her search. She fished out several blocks of wood of various sizes. Nesting the blocks between the desk and her stomach, she felt along the side of the bag for a flap. She withdrew a sheet of white paper and set it on the desk.

"Now where did I...?" she murmured. "Oh, yes. Of course."

She reached into the pocket of her flowing green jacket and produced a black ink pad. She opened it, setting it on the corner of the desk.

I lowered myself onto my chair.

And watched as the blind woman selected a block, then turned it over to ink the rubber attached to the bottom. With great care, she stamped out a picture.

I scooted closer. A scene appeared: a California ranch house with a small cottage behind, both enclosed by a picket fence laced with roses; stepping stones leading from house to cottage; flowers; three birch trees. I held my breath. My house, my yard —

Mrs. Grady stamped a woman in jeans with her hands on her hips. Me.

"How did you — ?" I clamped my mouth shut. "Were you born blind, Mrs. Grady?"

"Hmm? Oh, no. I lost sight when I was five." Her fingers crept over the page, smearing the last image stamped, a birch tree. She frowned, gazing sightlessly at the hutch. "There's something missing," she said. She rummaged through her canvas bag. "There!" she said, fishing out another wooden block.

Mrs. Grady inked the stamp, then slapped the image on the paper. A little girl appeared in front of the woman, her head cocked defiantly.

Just then the front door banged open. Andrea streaked past, flinging her books at the couch before careening toward the kitchen. "Mom, I'm home!" she called.

"Whoa! What was — " I began, then decided to forego our usual

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ritual. "Andrea, come here, Pumpkin," I said. "I want you to meet someone."

She came — half-eaten snickerdoodle in hand. I gave her my best stink eye. "Andrea, what did we talk about?" I said, trying to keep my voice even. Hard to do, with my throat tightening around the words. "You can have fruit, carrots, or crackers after school. No cookies."

She popped the rest of the snickerdoodle in her mouth.

"Well, I guess there'll be no more cookies in *this* house for the next two weeks," I said.

Andrea shrugged.

I counted five. It was just a cookie. "Mrs. Grady, this is my daughter, Andrea."

Mrs. Grady touched the little girl stamp. She smiled. "Hello, Andrea. A pleasure to meet you."

"Hi," Andrea said. She peeked at the picture on Mrs. Grady's desk, then knelt beside her. "Wow. Did *you* do this?"

Mrs. Grady chuckled. "Yes, I did."

"But — " Andrea's eyes grew wide. She looked at me.

"Don't be afraid to ask me anything, child," Mrs. Grady said. "But what?"

"But you can't see, can you? How did you know where to put everything?" Andrea leaned closer. "Do you have a dog?" she whispered. "Mom says we have to wait, but if *you* have one...."

"No," Mrs. Grady said, touching her forehead to Andrea's. "I haven't really needed one. Do you think I should get a dog?"

"Everybody should have a dog," Andrea said gravely.

Mrs. Grady nodded, a hint of smile twitching the corner of her mouth. She pulled a stamp from her jacket pocket, inked it and pressed it to the paper. A face peered out of the cottage window. Hers.

My qualms about her winked out — disappeared — like a star falling.

The next day I came home from the office to find a crumpled scrap outside the front gate. I opened the paper, smoothing it. The picture, done with stamps and colored markers, showed a moving van pulling out of my driveway. Mrs. Grady's smiling face appeared in the cottage window.

I unlocked my front door, then peeked at the cottage. Mrs. Grady's

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silhouette glided past the little windows. Busy arranging things no doubt. After I got dinner started, I'd see if she'd like to join us for supper.

If she'd like to join *me*, at any rate. Andrea was at Brownies. Jenna's mom, Linda, usually dropped her off around five, but sometimes Linda invited Andrea to dinner. Tom, Jenna's dad, would be there. Good. The more time Andrea spent with an intact nuclear family, the better. The more time she spent with a father figure, the better....

While the corn chowder simmered on the stove, I returned to the sliding glass door. The sun set. No lights went on in the cottage. Mrs. Grady's shadow fused with the dusk.

At ten after five, Andrea burst into the house, a sheaf of papers in her hand. The papers skimmed the coffee table, her sweater rocketed over the sofa, one shoe rolled under the hutch. "Mom, I'm home!"

I opened my arms wide and intercepted her. "Whoa! What was that?" I said, reciting my part of the ritual.

She pressed against me. "A fruit bat!"

A fruit bat — she'd never been a fruit bat before. I hugged her and let her go. "Good thing I bought bananas," I said. "After you put your things away, I'd like you to ask Mrs. Grady to join us for dinner. It'll be ready in twenty minutes."

"Okay," she said. She gathered everything — except the shoe under the hutch — and tossed it in her room. I shook my head. I hoped Mrs. Grady liked fruit bats.

Apparently she did. I had to fetch tenant and daughter forty minutes later.

Light glowed in the cottage windows. The door swung open at my knock.

The cottage had been transformed. A four-room mother-in-law unit, it boasted a full bath, a kitchen, a bedroom, and a living room. Most tenants set up a small table in the living room, along with entertainment center, sofa, and coffee table. Mrs. Grady had set up a large butcher block table, four chairs, a canning cupboard, and shelves, lots of shallow, narrow shelves. They stretched from floor to ceiling, covering every inch of wall space in the living room. Two of the shelves folded open in a triptych. Through the open bedroom door, more shelves were visible. All empty.

So far. Boxes covered the floor, each overflowing with rubber stamps.

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"Hi, Mom," Andrea said, sorting through a box. She picked out a stamp of a dog with a lobster clipped to its tail. "This one's great," she said.

Mrs. Grady held out her hand. Andrea set the stamp on her palm. Mrs. Grady ran her fingers over the rubber. A smile dimpled her cheeks. "Oh, yes. I was in a silly mood when I bought that one." She twisted a little, facing me. "Is it time for dinner, dear? I so lose track of time when I'm with my stamps."

"More soup, Mrs. Grady?" I asked, reaching for her bowl.

Mrs. Grady sighed. "Oh, land, another bite and I'll burst. Thank you, dear. What a wonderful welcome!"

"And now dessert," Andrea said, eyeing me hopefully. "Mom makes the best snickerdoodles in the whole world."

"Remember what happened yesterday?" I said.

Andrea's face crumpled. She pushed herself to her feet and began gathering silverware and bowls. She stopped at the kitchen door. "Fruit bats need lots of sugar," she said.

"Not when they sneak it without asking," I said. That funny knot formed in my throat. I tried to ignore it. "Any homework?"

Andrea returned to gather the last of the dishes. She shuffled around the table, head drooping. I knew what she was doing, but it doubled the knot in my throat anyway. "I have to think up three questions for the bat lady," she said. Her voice was a woeful hush. She dragged an unused knife from the table, then plodded toward the kitchen. "Ms. Richter says we're getting pictures of our fruit bat soon."

"Her class adopted a fruit bat," I explained to Mrs. Grady.

"She's a lovely child," Mrs. Grady said.

I wadded and unwadded my napkin. "Yes, she is. I just wish...."

"You just wish you could give her more," Mrs. Grady said.

"Yes, I do," I said. And I caved in. "Andrea, Pumpkin, why don't you put some snickerdoodles on a plate and bring them out for Mrs. Grady. And one for yourself. But remember — no more sweets after school."

When Andrea returned with the plate of cookies, she rewarded me with a huge smile — a huge, *smug* smile. I gave her a warning look, then patted her bottom. "Homework," I said.

Mrs. Grady and I sat quietly after she left. Then I cleared my throat

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and pushed the snickerdoodles closer to Mrs. Grady. "Cookie?" I offered.

Mrs. Grady took one. She tilted her head, a thoughtful look on her face. "What more do you want for her?" she asked. "What's missing?"

I sighed. "Nothing much, just a father. Greg died when she was a year old. Which means she misses out on all the father-daughter stuff, being the apple of some man's eye. I give her all the love I can, but father-daughter bonds...."

I pressed my lips together. "It's hard on her. Even the kids from divorced families get to see Dad. And some days are harder than others. The school just had a father-daughter dinner. Her friends kept griping about 'having to go to that thing with Dad.' She would have loved to feel put out."

"Has she asked you for a father?" Mrs. Grady held the snickerdoodle in both hands. "You have dated?"

"Oh, I've dated." I made a face, thinking about the last one. "Barney with a wig," that's what Andrea called Jared, which wasn't exactly true. He *was* artificially sweet — cloying — but he wasn't purple.

I reached for a cookie, snapped it in half. "Andrea says she doesn't want *any* dad, she wants the *right* dad. Which is fine with me. So, since I won't be giving her a dad anytime soon, I try to be more of a friend to her. I try to see things her way, cut her a little more slack. It seems only fair."

Mrs. Grady nodded, her milky eyes conveying a vast distance. Even her voice sounded far away. "Is it?" she asked.

I STOOD BY the walnut coffee table and sorted the mail. Bills for Andrea and me — I tossed those on the coffee table. A small package bearing a change of address sticker for Mrs. Grady. I smiled at the return address. Rubberstilzkin....

"Mom, I'm home!" Andrea called, hurling her books at the couch before dashing to the kitchen.

I tossed another bill on the coffee table. "Whoa! What was that?"

"A herd of turtles!" Andrea said, reappearing with an apple in her hand.

The phone rang. Andrea backed into the sofa and sat on her math book.

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I studied her, letting the phone ring twice more. Then I went to the dining room to answer it. "Hello?" I said.

"Hello, Ms. Hill?" a harried voice said. "This is Ms. Richter, Andrea's teacher?"

I moved to the left so I could see Andrea. She dropped her gaze, staring at her knees. "This is Carolyn Hill," I said. "What can I do for you, Ms. Richter?"

"Andrea's been acting out in class again," Ms. Richter said. "Today she decided she wasn't interested in our math lesson so she left the classroom. My aide found her two blocks from the school, sitting on a bench waiting for a transit bus. With the photo of our adopted fruit bat."

"I see," I said. Andrea peeked at me. I gave her stink eye. She looked away.

"I don't think you do," Ms. Richter said. "She cut the photo from the bulletin board with a pocketknife. Did you know she had a pocketknife?"

I pinched the bridge of my nose. "It was her father's. She's not supposed to have it at school."

"Well, it's here. You need to keep better track of it. We haven't got funding for a metal detector."

Ms. Richter and I talked about the problem for a few minutes, then I hung up. I walked into the living room. "Where is your father's pocketknife?"

"Ms. Richter took it," Andrea whispered.

"Good," I said. "I think we'll let her keep it for a while. Care to explain why you left class today?"

Andrea squirmed in place, grinding the math book into the sofa. "We were doing division again and I *know* division — "

"Not an excuse. When you're in class, you do as the teacher tells you — "

"But Ms. Richter was reviewing it for the dummies and I already know — "

"A little review won't hurt you. And I don't ever want to hear you call anyone a dummy again. Understand?"

She kicked the coffee table leg. "Yes."

"Good." I rolled the tension from my shoulders, glad to be done with the whole thing. "I'll be right back. I'm going to take Mrs. Grady her mail."

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Andrea's eyes lit up. "Can I take it?"

She'd been over there every day this week.... "Not this time," I said. "Besides, I hear you've got some math to catch up on."

"But Mom — "

"Just do it," I said.

She tilted her chin and gave me *her* best stink eye — only a tenth as effective as mine, but coming along nicely. "Needs work," I said. "I'll be back in a minute."

I hadn't been to the cottage since Mrs. Grady moved in the week before. "Hello, Carolyn," Mrs. Grady said, answering my knock. "I was expecting Andrea. She's not ill?"

"No, she's doing her home — " I stopped. An exhibition of tiny pictures covered the walls. Across from me were plants — trees, flowers, grasses, leaves, vines, even cacti. Mixed in were stones and fences, ponds and bridges, road signs — all the stuff of landscapes. A portrait gallery graced the wall next to the plants. Eleanor Roosevelt grinned at me; Beethoven glared.

I shook my head. "I've never seen so many rubber stamps."

Mrs. Grady backed into the cottage, gesturing for me to follow. "And you won't see half of them if you don't come in."

There were animals (a tiger crouching, a frog in Edwardian finery), birds (a flock of flamingoes, a pelican with an eye patch), bugs (an ant carrying an invisible load, two flies sitting down to breakfast), and things, all kinds of things. Cars and planes, cooking utensils, computers, musical instruments, a fire hydrant....

"You could create an entire world," I said.

Mrs. Grady walked over to the animals and brushed the wooden blocks with her fingers. She chose one, then handed it to me. "It's been done," she said.

I looked down at the stamp. A tabby cat held the Earth between its paws.

Mrs. Grady giggled. Her cheeks pinked like a child's. "When I'm feeling irreverent," she whispered, "I call it the God stamp."

"Well," I said, touching her hand with the package, "I hope you have room for more."

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"Always room for more," she said with relish. She took a pair of scissors from the canning cupboard and opened the package. "Oh, good," she said, pulling out two stamps. She felt the rubber, then set the stamps on the table: two birds practicing handwriting and a man with an umbrella being blown away.

I glanced at the table. Three plastic stack trays stood in one corner, the middle one completely empty, the top one overflowing. The bottom tray held one sheet of paper. More paper scattered across the desk, each page covered with stamped impressions. On one, a little girl jumped over and over, stamped in a bouquet of colors. I touched a magenta girl —

"Would you like to do a picture?" Mrs. Grady said.

"No, I — maybe some other time."

"Andrea's done quite a few already," Mrs. Grady said, reaching for the stack in the top tray. "But she's only completed one." She set the papers in front of me.

Andrea's "pictures" were largely experiments. On several she had stamped images at random as if curious to see how they really looked. Smearing marred many of the images, grid-like framing haunted others. She tended toward animals and toys — a red wagon had been repeated over and over on one page — with two pages devoted to dogs. Newfoundlands, boxers, fox terriers, retrievers, every dog imaginable. It seemed Mrs. Grady had an inexhaustible supply of canines.

Mrs. Grady handed me the last three sheets. Suddenly the "pictures" *became* pictures. Or, I should say, the same picture...with variations.

Andrea had followed Mrs. Grady's lead and stamped out our house and yard. She had used most of the same stamps, but instead of the petulant little girl she had substituted a girl holding a stick above her head.

And she had added a dog. Three different dogs. A collie romped in the first picture, a daschund gamboled in the second, a mastiff drooled in the third.

I touched the little girl. Laughing, the girl brandished the stick, leaning back slightly as if the dog might jump on her to get at the prize. My heart ached. She'd wanted a dog for so long. I'd promised her, many times, that when she was old enough, we'd get one. A medium one. No barking rats and no goliaths. I pressed my fingers to the tiny, printed face. "Oh, Pumpkin," I whispered.

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Then Mrs. Grady handed me the picture from the bottom tray. It was the same picture, but this time a golden retriever sported with the girl while a woman watched, smiling. The picture had been done in colored inks, everything carefully tinted with markers and color pencils.

"She asked me to stamp out the house and yard," Mrs. Grady said, brushing her fingers across the page. "But I told her, no, all of it had to come from her." She turned those milky eyes on me. "Just as it must come from you, dear."

I tapped the picture. "Can I — may I keep this?"

Mrs. Grady took the picture and slid it into the bottom tray. "Not this one," she said. "It needs to sit in the tray just a bit longer. And you, what do you want? What will you stamp?"

I straightened and looked around the room. Images crowded around me like expectant children. I shook my head, overwhelmed. "I don't know," I said. "There's too much to choose from."

"It's not too much, dear," Mrs. Grady said. "It's choice. Don't be afraid to make the wrong choice. The right choice will find you." She scrunched her nose at me, a kind of conspiratorial wink. "And in the meantime, experiment. Have fun."

I RUBBED THE BACK of my neck and fumbled open the gate. I had just enough time to take a quick shower before Andrea got home —

The golden retriever bounded to meet me. I stepped back. The dog danced around me, barking and wagging his tail. I patted his head.

"Where did you come from?" I said, then glanced at the cottage.

The door opened and Mrs. Grady stepped out, my surprise mirrored in her face. "Did you get a dog, dear?" she said.

"I don't know," I said. "I mean, he was just here."

"Oh, my land!" Mrs. Grady gasped. "It's never happened this quickly before. Not with other people's pictures. I only put it in the tray two days ago. Must be those new inks...."

The dog licked my hand. "He's probably lost," I said, stroking one of his ears. My fingers brushed a collar. "Here. He's got tags. This'll tell us where he belongs."

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I squatted beside the golden retriever, choking on his breath. His tags jangled as I sorted through them — rabies, license, ID. I turned the ID tag toward me. "Here we go," I said. "His name is Chester and he lives at — " I looked up at Mrs. Grady. "He lives *here.* Mrs. Grady, you didn't...?"

Mrs. Grady sniffed. "Certainly not, dear. Not without asking you."

I stood. "Well, he's licensed. I'm going to call the SPCA."

Chester followed me to the house and flopped in the flower bed beside the step. Only it was no longer a flower bed. The marguerites I had planted there years ago had disappeared, replaced by a worn, Chester-sized furrow. Two ceramic dishes butted up against the step, one empty and coated with brown meal, the other mineral-crusted and half full of water.

I stared at the dishes, then at Chester. Chester grinned, tongue draped between his lower teeth. "Don't go anywhere," I said, and hurried into the house.

I returned minutes later, stunned. I sat on the bottom step next to Chester. He put his head in my lap.

Mrs. Grady opened her door. "Well?" she said, but I could tell she already knew.

"He's ours," I said. "I don't know how — "

Andrea squealed and clambered over the gate. Chester snapped up a stick and ran to meet her. Dropping it at her feet, he barked.

Andrea fell to her knees and threw her arms around his neck. "Oh, Mom!" she said, burrowing her face into the retriever's feathery fur. "Where did you find him? Can I name him?"

I held my breath. "What do you want to call him?"

Andrea touched her nose to the dog's. "Chester."

I breathed out. "Good thing," I said.

That Friday afternoon I went to the cottage to invite Mrs. Grady to dinner. Andrea — and Chester — had been invited to spend the night at Jenna's. Andrea would also be spending Sunday at the Boardwalk with Jenna's family. I wondered if, maybe, it wasn't too much. But Tom had offered to include her....

I glanced at the darkened cottage windows. Steam coated the glass, turning the windows opaque. I rapped at the door. "Mrs. Grady?" I called.

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The door opened. The scent of roast chicken spilled from the cottage. Mrs. Grady leaned out, her cheeks oven-warmed to a deep rose. "You must be psychic, dear," she said. "I was just about to come invite you to dinner. Chicken and broccoli. And salad. I love those new salad mixes."

I laughed. "I was coming over to invite *you*."

"Have you started cooking yet?" she said.

"No, not yet."

"Then I win!" She backed into the cottage, gesturing broadly. "Come in, come in! It's almost ready. If you wouldn't mind straightening the table...."

"Not at all." I switched on the light and went to the table. Two layers of paper matted the surface. I looked around for Mrs. Grady. She'd disappeared. "Where should I put the pictures?" I shouted.

"In the top tray, dear," she called from the kitchen. "They're all Andrea's."

I gathered the papers, curious to see what Andrea had come up with this time. She had done the yard again, with the golden retriever and the girl playing, and the mother looking on, but this time a man stood next to the mother. She had stamped this picture several times, using different men just as she had used different dogs earlier. She had used a cowboy, a man in a tuxedo, a man in snorkeling gear, and Michelangelo's David. In one, the mother was talking to a generic superhero. I set the pictures in the top tray and picked up the last one.

A little girl and her mother stood in the middle of the page, fenced in by the picket and climbing rose stamp. The pickets pointed to the edges of the paper, as if they had been laid on the ground. The little girl looked scared.....

I shivered.

Mrs. Grady came in with two plates loaded with silverware. "Dinner's almost ready," she said, setting the dishes on the table. "Did you see Andrea's drawings?"

I set the picture in the tray. "Yes. It looks like she's auditioning dads."

Mrs. Grady chuckled, wiping her hands on her apron. "It does, doesn't it? She said she just wanted to 'try it on,' see how it felt." Mrs. Grady's chuckle settled into a smile. "And she liked it well enough to try it on several times. But the last one — that's the important one."

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"The one where she's fenced in? Trapped?" I chafed my arms. "That's not what *I* want for her."

Mrs. Grady tilted her head. "Oh? Well, there's nothing to stop you from stamping what you want after dinner."

"No, no, no," Mrs. Grady said, taking the dirty plates from my hands. "You just sit here and stamp. I'll do the dishes." She arched her eyebrows at my intake of breath. "No protests. I insist. It's what *I* want."

"I'd be happy — "

"You can wipe the table down, that's what you can do. Then go pick out some stamps. Paper, ink, all that stuff is in the canning cupboard."

So I wiped down the table. Then I approached the shelves. So many images. I scanned each section, drawn to some stamps, amused by others. I kept coming back to one in particular: a garden gate, slightly ajar. I picked it up three times, carried it around, then put it back.

I ignored the picket and rose stamp. The scared girl's eyes pleaded with me whenever I walked past her shelf. I turned her around so that the rubber faced out.

I concentrated on Andrea, then went around the room gathering the "everything" I wanted for her: a computer, a college degree, books, toys, food, people — everything and anything I could think of. I added several heart stamps for love. I passed over the gate several times. Finally, I took it to the table.

First I stamped a little girl surrounded by mountains of people and things. I frowned. Something wasn't right. I stamped out a different version. Still off. I did two, three more, adding or subtracting elements. In one, people and hearts crowded the girl. In another, the people stood on one side of her, the things mounded on the other. In the last, hearts circled everything. I sat back, a lacy heart stamp in my hand, inked and ready.

Was this really what I wanted for Andrea? Possessions? I mean, I wanted her to be comfortable. Friends? Of course, but Andrea already knew how to make and keep friends. Accomplishments? Well, yes. And love, although she already had that in plenty. But something was missing —

Mrs. Grady set two mugs of peppermint tea on the table. She sat down, pulling one of the mugs into her hands. She held it, her fingers fencing it in.

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I stared at her hands and thought about Andrea's picket fence. I didn't want Andrea to feel restricted, I didn't want her to feel limited — not by me, not by the father she never knew, not by anything. I wanted her to be free.

I reached for the fuschia ink pad and stamped the silhouette of a little girl jumping, arms flung wide, in the middle of the page, with nothing around her to confine or frighten her. Then I sat back. "That's it," I said, reaching for the tea.

But it wasn't, I could feel it.

Mrs. Grady set down her mug and collected my pictures. She ran her fingertips over each one. She nodded and clucked — until she came to the girl jumping. Sweeping her hand across the page, she frowned, then swept the picture with her open palm. "Which stamps did you use on this one?" she said.

I handed her the stamp of the girl jumping.

She felt the rubber, the ink staining her fingers. She murmured, then set the papers in the middle tray. "These aren't finished. Maybe next time — "

I retrieved the drawing of Andrea free. "What about this one?" I asked.

Mrs. Grady touched it. Her lips pursed. "Are you sure?"

Doubt crept through me. "I think so."

She hesitated. "We can try it, dear," she said, placing the drawing in the bottom tray. "We can always remove it."

SUNDAY MORNING I walked to the corner market for a newspaper. As I walked the block and a half home, my thoughts kept returning to Andrea's picture and mine. Since Friday night, my doubts about both pictures had grown. I opened the front door, mulling the whole thing over on the way to the kitchen. Maybe I should do another picture, a different one —

I froze. Andrea sat on the kitchen floor, crumbs dribbling from her chipmunked cheeks, a large French knife in her hand. Five broken cookies dotted the linoleum like cow pies. Chester nosed one away from Andrea's foot and ate it. Andrea raised the knife, its wide, triangular blade gleaming, then brought it down with a slash. A cookie exploded in two. A deep scar rent the linoleum. It was not the first. Andrea raised the knife again —

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I grabbed her wrist. "*What* are you doing?" I roared.

Chester darted for cover under the kitchen table.

Andrea jerked upright, chewed once and swallowed. Her voice escaped in a crumb-clogged mumble. "Chester and I were hungry."

I pried the knife from her hand and set it on the counter. "You are *not* to play with that knife. You are *never* to play with that knife. Or any *other* knife."

Andrea pulled away, gaze fixed on me. "But the cookies were too big. Chester was eating them too fast — "

I jerked her to her feet. "And that's another thing. The dog does *not* eat cookies or any other people food — "

Someone knocked on the front door. "Yo! Anybody home?"

I stiffened. Jenna's dad, Tom, coming to take Andrea to the Boardwalk.

I looked at Andrea. Her eyes pleaded with me. This acting out, as Ms. Richter called it, was getting worse. Leaving school, playing with knives...I glanced at the gashed and curling linoleum. A line had to be drawn somewhere —

But she'd been looking forward to the Boardwalk all week, counting the days till Sunday. She'd get to spend the day with Jenna and Tom, with a father, maybe not her own father, but a father. The one thing I couldn't give her....

"Hello?" Tom called. "Carolyn? Andrea?"

My shoulders sagged. "Go on," I said. "Don't forget your sweatshirt. We'll talk about this later."

Andrea nodded, then bolted for the door.

There would be no talk later. We both knew that.

The next day at work I got another call from the school.

"There's been an accident," Mr. Harbin said.

"Dear God." My stomach shrank to a cold, hard fist. "Is Andrea okay?"

The principal's voice grew crisp. "I wouldn't say that."

The knot in my stomach cinched tighter and tighter as he explained. Andrea had taken the French knife to school. A boy in her class, Kirby March, saw it in her backpack and asked to see it. Andrea told him to wait

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till lunch, then the two of them crossed the field to the pepper tree where no one could see them. They hacked at the tree's knobby bark, then decided to climb to the lowest branch and see if they could saw off a limb. Andrea climbed up first, the knife between her teeth. The yard duty teacher spotted her and shouted. Andrea took the knife from her mouth to answer, then slipped and fell. The knife tumbled from her hand —

My heart pounded. *Not her arm, not her face,* I prayed.

— slicing through Kirby's sneaker, lopping off two toes.

My stomach unknotted. Guilt tainted my relief.

"Andrea says the knife is hers," Mr. Harbin said.

"No — it's — no," I stammered. "My God, what kind of idiot do you think I am? She's seven years old! Nobody hands a seven-year-old a knife!"

"I thought she might be exaggerating," Mr. Harbin said. The brittleness left his voice, replaced by a more patronizing tone. "Ms. Hill, I've talked to Ms. Richter and the school psychologist about Andrea's recent fascination with knives. We've decided not to contact CPS at this time...."

I lowered my head to my fist. Child Protective Services. Dear God.

"...upset right now," Mr. Harbin concluded. "I'd like you to pick her up as soon as possible." He paused. "Ms. Hill?"

I had to clear my throat twice. "I'm coming," I said.

Andrea cried the entire trip home. "He almost died!" she wailed.

"No, Pumpkin, he didn't," I said, pulling into the driveway. I was caught between an urge to scold and a desire to comfort. Andrea needed both. "Kirby lost his toes, but he didn't almost die."

Andrea's sobs doubled. I switched off the ignition and pulled her into my arms. "Andrea," I said, "someone got hurt very badly. Someone *could* have died. But they didn't."

She calmed a little.

"You need to learn from this," I said. I tipped her face to mine. "Did you? What did you learn?"

"Not to — not to take — knives to school." She sniffed. "Mom? Can I call Kirby and tell him I'm sorry?"

I hugged her. "Of course, you can. Think, maybe, you should apologize to his parents, too?"

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She went rigid and pulled away, shaking her head. Terror widened her eyes.

I sighed. "All right," I said, ruffling Andrea's hair. "*I'll* do it. Come on. We've got a call to make." I opened the front gate. "Why did you take the knife to school, Pumpkin?"

She sniffed. "'Cause I wanted to feel safe."

I stopped, my mind filled with the image of a girl and her mother in an enclosed yard. Not enclosed as in *trapped.* Enclosed as in *safe.*

I gripped one of the pickets to steady myself. "You go on ahead, Pumpkin. I need to talk to Mrs. Grady."

Andrea nodded and scuffed her way to the house. I followed the stepping stones to the cottage. Mrs. Grady met me at the door. "Is something wrong, dear?" she said. "You're home so early."

"Can you — " I held my breath. "Would you take my picture out of the bottom tray?"

Relief softened her features. "Certainly, dear."

"Thanks," I said. "I'll explain later."

"No need to explain," Mrs. Grady said. "Just come by tomorrow."

I went straight to Mrs. Grady's after work the next day. It was Brownie day. Andrea wouldn't be home till five. Chester followed me to the cottage, yapping and bouncing, his body wriggling with each wag of his tail.

Mrs. Grady opened the door before I knocked. "There you are!" she said. "I've been expecting you. Ready to do another drawing?"

My cheeks warmed. "Yes. Yes, I am."

Mrs. Grady nodded once. "Good. Andrea was quite put out when I refused to slip her latest picture into the bottom tray. I told her we needed to wait for you."

I stared at her. "*What*? When?"

"Sunday. After she came home from the Boardwalk." Mrs. Grady opened the door wide, ushering Chester and me inside. Chester scrabbled at Mrs. Grady's feet, licking her ankles. Mrs. Grady bent to pet him. "You little scamp. Would you like a dog biscuit? Hmm?"

I took a deep breath. "Would it be all right — may I see Andrea's drawing?"

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Mrs. Grady straightened. "No," she said. "You may not." She clucked at Chester. "Let's go in the kitchen, Chester, and whip up a little something for dinner. Wouldn't want everyone to go hungry. Oh, and, Carolyn? Remember to use the stamps you're drawn to, dear."

I went to the shelves to find the garden gate.

MRS. GRADY opened the cottage door. She clucked to Chester, then the two of them went outside. "Andrea, honey, your mother's inside," she called. "Why don't you show me the garden. Mmm, it smells like Spring!"

My own stamped garden glowed with Spring — with vibrant marker inks and the soft shading of color pencils. I reached for a tube of iridescent glitter glue and added dew drops to the roses, then sat back to consider my finished drawing.

A picket fence with climbing roses enclosed a grassy field. Unlike Andrea's fence, mine had a garden gate, slightly ajar. Monsters crowded outside the fence at the left end of the enclosure, while inside a mother and daughter held hands. Fewer monsters crowded outside the fence toward the middle. Here the mother and daughter, older now, walked together but separate. At the right end of the page, one lone monster waited outside the fence, a bulbous creature with a silly smile. The mother stood on the inside of the gate and waved. Her daughter, a young woman, waved from outside the gate.

I touched one of the roses. Glitter came away on my finger.

Two sets of footsteps stomped in place outside the cottage door. "It *is* getting chilly!" Mrs. Grady said. "Let's see if your mother's done."

The door opened. Andrea wriggled past Mrs. Grady and launched herself at me. "Mom, I'm home!" she said, burrowing into my arms. Her nose pressed against my bare arm, cold as a dime in January.

"Whoa!" I said. "What was that?"

Andrea giggled. "A hungry person!"

"Two hungry people," Mrs. Grady said. "Did you finish, dear?"

"Just barely," I said. "But I'm not sure how it's going to work."

Mrs. Grady walked over to the table. Her fingers skimmed the drawing. A smile bloomed on her face. She drew her hand away, her fingertips sparkling with glitter as if she'd touched magic. "Somewhere

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inside, you know," she said, "or you couldn't have done this."

She slid the drawing into the bottom tray along with one of Andrea's.

The next day, I sat on the couch with the mail in my lap, separating the bills from the junk mail. The door flew open and Andrea rocketed into the living room. Her arm shot out, then recoiled — without tossing her books at the sofa. "Mom, I'm home!" she called, disappearing into the kitchen.

"Whoa!" I said, dropping a bill on the coffee table. "What was that?"

"A White's tree frog!"

I looked up, then shook my head. A tree frog. I finished sorting the wheat from the chaff and tossed the chaff away. I took the bills to the kitchen —

And caught Andrea sneaking two macaroons.

"That's it," I said, extending my hand. "No more cookies for a week."

Andrea pretended to be contrite. She handed me the cookies.

I opened a drawer and pulled out a plastic vegetable bag. Dropping the macaroons in the bag, I reached for the cookie jar and emptied *it* into the bag. Then I left the kitchen, headed for Mrs. Grady's.

Andrea trailed after me, mouth agape. "Mom?"

I knocked at the cottage door. Mrs. Grady opened it. "Hello, dear," she said. "Mmm, something smells good...."

I set the bag in her hands. "We won't be eating cookies at our house for the next week. I was wondering if you'd like some macaroons."

"Oh, I love macaroons," Mrs. Grady said, dipping her hand in the bag.

"And please," I said, "don't give any to Andrea. She can't have any cookies till next Wednesday."

Andrea's jaw dropped even more.

Mrs. Grady took a bite of macaroon and murmured. "Wonderful!" She nodded solemnly. "No sweets for Andrea. I understand."

And suddenly, so did I. I wet my lips, then felt my own eyes widen. That tightness in my throat...gone. So were the guilty arguments that usually filled my head at moments like this. I hadn't even thought, I'd just acted —

I turned to Mrs. Grady. She beamed at me. "Come in," she said. "I'd like to show you Andrea's drawing."

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My hand shook as I accepted the paper. Andrea had repeated her picture of the girl and her mother in the yard. But this time the little girl wasn't afraid.

Mrs. Grady and I developed our own ritual — tea on Brownie day. One week Mrs. Grady ushered me into the cottage, an amused smile just touching her lips. "Andrea did another drawing yesterday," she said. "I think you should see it."

Sure enough, a new drawing rested in the bottom tray. I grasped the back of the nearest chair. Excitement and apprehension tingled through me. Andrea had known what we both needed the last time, but still, placing my life in the hands of a seven-year-old....

"What is this one about?" I asked, trying to sound casual.

Mrs. Grady grinned. "She's auditioning fathers again."

Placing my love *life in the hands of a seven-year-old,* I amended. "And who did she choose? Not the superhero, I hope."

"No, not the superhero." Mrs. Grady took the drawing from the tray. "She did something interesting. She couldn't decide, so she stamped several images on top of each other. Watch for a snorkeler who owns a tuxedo, likes country western music, and looks like Michelangelo's David."

"Not bad," I admitted, scanning the people shelf. "But I think I better stamp my own version."

"Remember to use the stamps you're drawn to, dear," Mrs. Grady said.

I smiled. Just what I needed — a guy who looked like a garden gate.

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SCIENCE

PAUL DOHERTY & PAT MURPHY

GRAVITY FOR THE ADVENTUROUS

WE ARE HERE to mess with your mind. Let's get that straight from the start. One of the lessons that we have both learned at the Exploratorium is: Take no one's word for the truth. Experiment. Make your own observations.

We are here to pass those lessons along. But first, we are here to mess with your mind.

THE WAY YOU THINK IT IS

At the Exploratorium, we have an exhibit that consists of a clear plastic tube that's about five feet long, hooked up to a vacuum pump. Inside the tube is a small plastic chicken and a brightly colored feather. You can flip the tube over and watch the two objects fall.

If the tube is filled with air, the feather floats gently downward and the chicken drops like — well, like a plastic chicken. But if you use the vacuum pump to evacuate most of the air from the tube and then repeat the experiment, you get a very different result. The feather and the chicken fall side by side, hitting the bottom of the tube at exactly the same time.

When astronaut David Scott stood on the moon and dropped a geologist's hammer and a falcon feather side by side, he demonstrated the same principle. The hammer and the feather struck the lunar surface at the same time.

Scott's lunar antics and the Exploratorium exhibit both relate to some of the stuff with which Galileo was messing back in 1604. If you took high school physics, you probably learned the principle derived from Galileo's work. It's usually summed up as something like this: in the absence of air resistance, anything you drop will accelerate toward the ground at the acceleration of gravity, usually abbreviated as g. At the surface of the

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earth, g is just shy of 10 meters per second per second (32 feet per second squared). That means that anything you drop will accelerate from 0 mph to 60 mph (0 to 100 km/hr) in about three seconds. That's what your physics teacher probably told you. And if you're a good science fiction reader, you probably believed your physics teacher.

Not so fast. Take no one's word for the truth. Is what your physics teacher told you really true?

TAKING THE PLUNGE

To prepare for writing this article, Paul suggested that Pat experience free fall by riding "The Drop Zone" at Great America, a nearby amusement park. On this ride, you are strapped into a seat, hauled to the top of an 80-meter tower (higher than a 20-story building), and dropped.

Paul likes this ride. After all, you can make some interesting physics observations during the two seconds of free fall. For example, he says, you can watch the ground as it approaches and note the high acceleration. You can release a penny and notice how how it falls in relation to your fall. You can pay attention to the feeling in your innards as the springy windings of your intestines relax as you go into free fall.

So Paul suggested that Pat, in the interest of science, ride the Drop Zone — maybe ride it more than once, so she could make detailed observations. Pat, being a diligent researcher, did ride the Drop Zone, but her experiments did not go exactly as planned.

As readers of this magazine know, Pat is usually more concerned with character development than with science. At Great America, character development (or perhaps the lack of character development) interfered with physics research, though Pat did make a number of observations. Pat reported that she closed her eyes as soon as she was strapped into her seat. She observed that she swore a blue streak the entire time the seats were being lifted to the top of the tower, then noted that she screamed all the way down. She did report strange sensations in her intestines, though she refused to describe them as in any way relaxed.

Dave, Pat's research companion, did complete one of Paul's experiments. He placed a penny on his open hand and watched what happened to the coin as he fell. "Did you see that?" he asked Pat, when they reached the ground. "The

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penny rose away from my hand as we fell."

"See what?" asked Pat, as she opened her eyes for the first time since leaving the ground.

According to Galileo, that penny should have fallen with the exact same acceleration as Pat and Dave. Dave's hand was shielding the coin from the effects of wind resistance so the coin should have stayed right with Dave's hand. What gives? Do the riders on the drop zone accelerate faster than g, or does the the coin accelerate more slowly? Is Galileo spinning in his grave?

To figure this one out, Paul rode the drop zone a number of times. As he repeatedly plummeted to earth, he tried the coin experiment and observed the same strange behavior that Dave had noticed. He also made a few other observations. He noticed the restraining straps pushed down onto his shoulders as he went into free fall. That didn't make sense. Since the seat and Paul went into free fall at the same time, the car should be falling at the same rate as Paul and the straps shouldn't be pulling him down.

So Paul had two puzzles to figure out — the strange behavior of the coin and the push of the shoulder straps. He started experimenting around home, and figured a few things out; if you have a Slinky available you can do his experiments too.

FASTER THAN A FALLING SLINKY

Try this. Find a Slinky. Hold it by the top turn and let it dangle down from your hand. The bottom should be above the floor. (We had to cut off part of an older plastic Slinky to make it short enough.) With your other hand, hold a set of car keys next to the top of the Slinky.

Before you drop the keys and the Slinky at the same time, try to predict what will happen. Are you going to vote with Galileo and say that the top of the Slinky and the keys will reach the ground at the same time? Or are you a bit more suspicious now?

Okay — now try the experiment.

Ha! Take that, Galileo! The top of the Slinky beat the keys to the ground. The top of the Slinky accelerated downward much faster than the keys! Faster than the acceleration of gravity.

Now hold the Slinky as you did before and hold the keys next to the bottom of the Slinky. (If your arms are not long enough, bunch up a few

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turns of the Slinky at the top where you hold it.) Drop them at the same time. This time the keys fall faster, the bottom of the Slinky appears to just stay in place, and the keys beat the Slinky to the ground. Weird.

One last experiment. Fold the Slinky up tight and mark the middle with a piece of tape. This spot is the Slinky's center of mass. (You have to mark it, because when the Slinky stretches under its own weight, the center of mass won't be in the center of the stretched Slinky.) Hold the Slinky by its top again and drop the keys next to the center of mass of the Slinky. The keys and the center of mass fall together, the Slinky and the keys hit the floor together.

In free fall, the center of mass of an object accelerates at g. But if the object can change shape elastically as it falls, some parts may accelerate faster than g and some parts slower.

So what's going on here? Well, gravity isn't the only force working on all parts of the Slinky. The top turn of the Slinky, or the top "slink" (as Paul calls it) is pulled down by gravity, but it's also pulled down by the tension forces from the rest of the stretched Slinky. When you are holding the Slinky, the top turn is pulled up by your hand. The downward and upward forces add to zero so the top turn has zero acceleration. When you first let go, the Slinky is still stretched. The top is being pulled down by gravity as well as by the stretched spring below. So the top slink accelerates down faster than it would with the pull of gravity alone — faster than g acceleration.

The bottom of the Slinky is being pulled down by gravity and up by the stretched Slinky above. When you first let go, the Slinky begins to pull itself together starting at the top. It takes a while for the change in tension to propagate to the bottom. So the bottom remains at rest for a while.

SLINKY SPINE

The Slinky experiment helped us to understand why the shoulder straps on the ride pulled down on Paul; it wasn't because the car was falling faster than g. Paul's spine is elastic, like a Slinky! When Paul was sitting at rest at the top of the ride, his acceleration was zero. Gravity was pulling down on every bit of Paul and the seat was pushing up on his butt. In particular, Paul's head and shoulders were pushing down on his spine and the seat was pushing up so his spine was compressed.

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When Paul went into free fall, his spine was no longer pushed down by his head, so his spine expanded. He grew more than a centimeter taller in a fraction of a second. His expanding spine pushed his shoulders into the shoulder straps and Paul felt the reaction force of the shoulder straps on his body.

The human spine expands in free fall, which is something NASA has known for a long time. When astronauts go into free fall they grow, so their space suits have to have room for the lengthened spines. The same phenomenon explains why you are a little taller in the morning after lying down all night. Once you stand up and that massive head of yours squashes down on your spine, you shrink back down. You don't have to take our word for it. (Remember what we said at the beginning of the article?) Measure your height before you go to bed and before you get up and you'll find a difference.

The mysterious behavior of the penny can also be explained by examining what happens to your body when it is suddenly freed from the constraints of gravity. When Paul's arm was extended, holding the penny, the muscles were pulling up against gravity, keeping the arm still. When Paul went into free fall, his arm accelerated down with his body and the muscles no longer needed to pull upward to keep the arm in place. But it took a moment for Paul to get that message to his muscles, and the muscles kept pulling up for a fraction of a second. As a result, his arm jerked up involuntarily, launching the penny up out of his hand to where the effects of air resistance cause it to lag gently behind him as he fell.

THE PROBLEM OF THE BUNGEE JUMPERS

Folks at the Exploratorium are not the only ones performing odd experiments in free fall. A group of bungee-jumping high school student experimentalists, led by their teacher Clarence Bakken, decided to record their acceleration during a jump.

Before we tell you what happened, think about the situation. Before we started messing with your mind, you might have figured that they would all accelerate at g. What do you say now?

Well, every one of them accelerated at least 10 percent faster than g. How could this be?

Here's a clue. The bungee cord they used was tied to the bridge at foot level, hung down over the edge

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of the bridge and then came back up to them. Bungee cords are stretchy — if they weren't, the sudden stop at the end of the jump would probably kill the jumper. The bungee cord hanging off the bridge was stretched under its own weight. Think about what happened with the Slinky, and you'll be able to figure out why the bungee jumpers accelerated at a rate greater than g.

When the jumpers stepped off the bridge, they were not only pulled down by gravity. They were pulled down by the elastic forces from the stretched bungee cord.

Here's a Slinky model of the bungee jumpers. Hold both ends of the Slinky at the same height so that the middle sags down toward the floor in a U shape. Hold a set of keys in the hand that holds one end of the Slinky. Drop the keys and that end of the Slinky at the same time. Notice that the end of the Slinky accelerates down faster than the keys!

PEELING THE ONION

Physics professors spend a great deal of time and effort to convince students that in the absence of air resistance all objects fall at g. Understand this simple concept, and you are far ahead of most of the population in understanding how the universe works. However, you have to be careful not to extend simple models too far. In the case of our falling objects, there were elastic forces which increased the acceleration of parts of the object to greater than g.

As a teacher, Paul always begins with the simplest possible model that answers a question or explains an experiment. Modify the question and he may have to shift to a more complicated model. For example, ask how far a baseball drops as it is pitched across the front of a classroom and he'll use Newton's laws to figure it out. Ask how far light falls and he'll use general relativity (which gives exactly double the answer predicted by Newton). So he tells his classes that every answer he gives contains an asterisk*, and the invisible footnote says *"But it's more complicated than that."

When it comes to falling, the important physics idea is that everything falls at g. However, we have just shown you one of the asterisks. Elastic forces within an object can produce accelerations greater than g.

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Not So Fast, Galileo!

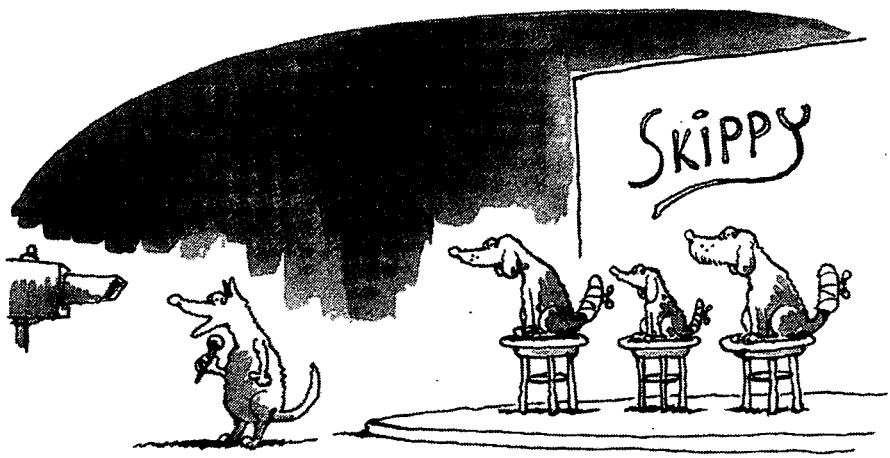
Here's a simple experiment that you can use to demonstrate that not all objects fall at the same rate.

Find a yardstick. (Paul says find a meter stick, but he went metric decades ago. Don't worry about it — a yardstick will do just fine.)

Lay the yardstick on the floor and lift one end up so that the stick makes a 45-degree angle with the floor.

Now hold a coin next to the end of the yardstick and drop both at the same time. The end of the stick will hit the floor before the coin. Notice that the coin always falls on top of the stick. If you watch from the side, you can see the coin lag behind. That's because the end of the stick is accelerating faster than g.

In free fall, the center of mass of an object accelerates at g. But the meter stick isn't in freefall because the floor is pushing up on the bottom of the stick. Also, the stick rotates as it falls. The combination of the force from the floor and the rotation of the stick leads to an acceleration of the tip that is greater than g. The complete explanation is another asterisk.☞



"Today on Skippy *— Dogs who chased their tails...and caught them!"*

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Mark J. McGarry sold his first story when he was eighteen, and has published a dozen more, and two novels, in the years since. He is an editor at one of the largest newspapers in the United States, and is also editor of the Bulletin *of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America.*

The following story grew out of two separate lines he jotted down: "What's inside Ali Baba's cave!" and "What's the worst thing that happened to you!" You might not recognize either line's role in the genesis of this tale, but we think you'll find the results to be powerful and poignant.

The Mercy Gate

By Mark J. McGarry

Anyone can stop a man's life,
but no one his death;
a thousand doors open on to it.
— Seneca

1

THEY CAME TO THE WORLD that had died in a single night, the kurtikutt pentad, the Proteus, and the human pair, to the city that had lain undisturbed for a dozen centuries.

A handful of days was all the kurtikutt tomb robbers would allow Bergstrom for his work. At the end of that time the last of his remotes coursed lonely through pale yellow skies, a cold methane wind whistling across its wings. Through the robot's faceted eyes, he looked down on a canvas painted in X-rays and infrared, sonar and radar, gravimetric

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gradients and the visible spectrum, to render a cityscape of graceful towers, vast amphitheaters, and parklands run riot. This was a preindustrial world, less promising than most Bergstrom had visited in the past eight years; still, he could have spent a lifetime in the city the Hand of God had touched.

"Time to go home now, Evan."

The voice was small and distant, a bit of noise in the data stream, but it drew him down. He tipped one graphite wing and spiraled in, toward the plaza at the city's heart, and the black pearl set there — the place where lines of electromagnetic force were drawn tight and the gravitational well became infinitely deep, a gate to other worlds.

He swept along streets filled with evidence of the final hours' torment, past smashed merchants' stalls; rune-etched ruby steles, toppled and broken; draft animals' skeletons yoked to overturned carts; crude barricades; a pyramidal gallows, its victim's mummified remains curled beneath the open trap. Across a hundred worlds, the progression had been the same: the sudden onslaught, virulent panic, scattered episodes of compassion or heroism, the swift descent into chaos, the unending silence.

"Evan?" Cara's voice again, this time a bit more insistent. Bergstrom triggered the remote's rudimentary intelligence, instructing it to complete the descent, and slid regretfully from the interface. The virtual reality folded in on itself, bright colors smearing to gray, the world spinning about him, but strong hands bore him up before he could fall.

"Steady now, comrade," the kurtikutts' Second Born rumbled from behind him.

"All right, lover?" Cara Austen said, her voice made hollow by her helmet and his. "You were deep into it." Her mitt brushed the thick hide of his sleeve. Like his, her environmental suit was much patched, a centuries-old salvage job. Through her helmet's scarred visor, Bergstrom saw the fine-boned face and long, buttery hair, those electric blue eyes, and he smiled a bit.

"All right now," he said hoarsely. And, over his shoulder: "Thanks."

The kurtikutt let him go, his vibrissae twitching with some inscrutable sentiment. "Sure thing, comrade," he said, righting Bergstrom's camp chair. The brute was roughly anthropoid, two meters of dense bone and muscle wrapped in a thick hide. His glittery metallic robes stirred in

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the methane breeze; the small, enameled shield strapped to the small of his back indicated birth rank in the Ruhk'thmar Clutch. The Second Born needed no environmental suit, only a transparent mask tailored for its broad muzzle and a flask of oxygen-argon mix hanging from a knitted sash. Like the Vandals and Visigoths, the kurtikutts were rugged.

"Chief says we're almost ready to go," Cara said. "He wants to pull out in fifteen minutes." Bergstrom nodded, and began peeling the VR system's induction patches from his wrist seals and helmet.

The wind picked up, whistling through the broken doors and empty-eyed windows of the towers fronting the plaza. It set dust devils to capering among the ruby obelisks placed at intervals along the perimeter of the square and brushed clean the grooves cut into its alabaster paving stones. The pattern grew more complex toward the center of the square, where bands of untarnished metal bound the Portal to the face of the dead world. Tall as a three-story building, sharp-edged and seemingly solid, the black hemisphere hummed faintly.

Though the plaza was largely unscarred, soot blackened the stone walls of a low, circular building not far from the stargate. Its door was smashed and burned, the pavement outside buckled from the fire's heat. The Portals themselves, existing largely outside conventional space, were virtually indestructible, but the mechanisms that aligned one gate with another were more delicate. Neither they nor their operators had long survived on worlds the Hand had touched.

One of the kurtikutts' sledges sat nearby, runners bowed under the weight of a battered antimatter generator. The youngest kurtikutt perched atop the vintage power plant, thick fingers stroking the control surfaces of his hand-built tuning rig. Cables sprouted from the device, snaking across the pavement and passing seamlessly into the Portal. Reconstructing the Outstepper technology was an arcane craft, synchronizing two gates an art. Once the Fifth Born was done, a single step would return them to Chimerine.

"Evan?" Concern edged her voice. "How about it, love?"

Bergstrom took a deep breath, the air thick in his throat. It was as if he could taste some lingering poison through all the layers of his environmental suit, could feel its chill, its holocaust taint. Foolish, perhaps...but then, these places always got to him.

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"My last bird is on its way in," he said, stooping to collect his battered recording gear. Twenty kilos of telefactoring systems, josephson arrays, and bubble storage — a modest container for a decade's work.

"Allow me," said Junior, taking the pack and Bergstrom's chair under one arm. He grinned, displaying a great many sharp teeth, and set off toward the tower where they had made camp.

"His big brother is grumbling about our shares again," Cara said after he had gone. "He's disappointed with the take and wants to make up for it on our end. I think I can hold the line, though."

"That damned pirate."

"It was worse with the last bunch," Cara reminded him. "At least we can be reasonably sure these pirates won't try to kill us in our sleep."

"Yes," he said flatly, "they're grave robbers, cheats, and barbarians, but they're not murderers."

He knelt to collect his remotes, a half-dozen robots he hung from his hip belt like game birds. "There's never enough time, Cara. Reisner had a decade just for Nubia."

"But you have a lot of good data, Evan."

"Not enough, and I haven't found any written records at all — just carvings that seem purely ornamental. This city is as sophisticated as Classical Athens, but you don't reach that level without some system of writing — you need it for trade, taxation, if nothing else."

"Evan," she said quietly, "we've been through this before. You get a glimpse of a new civilization and you want to study it down to the bones. Every one of them has a history as rich as ours. They each had a Parthenon, a Great Wall, a Jesus Christ, and a Genghis Khan. Most of them had their Neil Armstrongs and Harold Mawsons. Space platforms. Starships. Technology we could only guess at. It's all out there, waiting for you to dig it up. And you're a *good* archaeologist, lover...but we can't do that kind of work on our own. We can look at one problem — the most important one, as it happens — and just do the best we can."

"Sometimes I wonder if it's worth doing." He looked around. "We don't have a place to stand, Cara. Our own records are in pieces, and half the pieces are gone, either destroyed or locked up on worlds still hiding behind quarantine. The Portals themselves.... We can use the technology but we don't understand it, and the Outsteppers have been dust for ten

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thousand years or more. All we have are theories, Cara — not even that. Guesses. Hunches."

"You've done good work," she insisted.

"We need to do more. There should be some sort of commission, an agency, to send expeditions to every world the Hand smashed...and some kind of police corps, to keep the vandals out of places like this." He exhaled loudly. "Maybe in another thousand years, when we've built everything up again and people aren't so afraid of the dark."

"We'll go out again in a few months," she said.

"Maybe." Then, his voice flatter: "You did all right, then?"

"Yes...." She paused, thinking. "A few hundred kilograms of the usual bangles and art objects, including some intricate stone carvings I'm sure I have a buyer for. Four sets of mummified remains — "

"I need those for my work," Bergstrom said sharply.

"And we'll have them recorded before we let them go. I know Findlay Broz will make a bid for those. We'll let *him* pay for the recording — full spectrum. Then there's the heavy earthenware and one of those ruby pylons.... After the Chief's cut, we'll have enough left over to buy our way onto another expedition and, say, six months' living expenses."

Bergstrom only nodded. The silence between them lengthened.

"Do you want me to put it all back?" Cara said finally.

"Of course not."

"Do you want to go back to living on your papers and my teaching?"

"You know we can't. Not and do fieldwork."

"I do know," she said. "I wanted to be sure you did." Then: "We'd better get moving. The Chief isn't in a mood to wait. And I, for one, want to get home again."

Home was Flanders. Cara's world had been spared the plague, but not the chaos following the collapse of interstellar trade, the refugee hordes and quarantine wars, famine and revolution. It was the work of generations to rebuild, and Flanders' one university was not very old when Bergstrom came to it.

Cara turned away, her back stiff; Bergstrom opened his mouth to speak, then winced as his suit radio awakened with a crash of static. "Home again, home again," the Proteus said across the link, the emission modulated to a crude counterfeit of Bergstrom's own voice. He scowled.

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It swooped down from the saffron sky, took a turn around the square and plunged toward Bergstrom, buffeting him with the wind from its feathered wings. The pinions flowed like wax, two becoming four, an eagle's wings transforming to a honey bee's. The metamorph hovered, for now about a meter across, an amalgam of practical attributes sewed up in a scaly skin. From its limitless catalog it had selected a sleek, sinuous body, taloned feet, and a narrow head ringed with slitted eyes and less readily identifiable sensors.

"Carry?" it asked from a vaguely human mouth.

"You, no." But Bergstrom took a bulging sack from its claws. "This, yes."

"Gratitude," the Proteus said, fattening its lips to a sweetly smiling cupid's bow. "Kindly refrain from pilferage." It flew off in a flurry of transmogrification.

"Another pirate," Bergstrom said under his breath.

"More of a magpie, I think," Cara said. "But who knows? Maybe the little monster is a top archaeologist, too, back where he comes from."

Smiling sourly, Bergstrom hefted the pouch and loosened the drawstring. Nestled inside was a clutch of ruby eggs, finely polished, intricately etched, and glowing with some soft internal light. The same material as the obelisks ringing the plaza, the same runes. They would, he knew, fetch a fair price on the black markets of a dozen worlds.

Throat tight, he looked away and saw the square as it had been, the towers gleaming in the sun, the ruby steles glittering, standing tall above the throngs milling about the plaza. The people were small and fragile, with smooth, translucent skin, long arms and long, many-fingered hands, huge, dark eyes widely set in elongated skulls, slitted nostrils, small, lipless mouths. He heard their voices on the wind, a gentle keening, like the sound of cicadas across a distance.

"The creature does have a weakness for shiny things," he said, handing the bag to Cara. "I haven't seen these before."

She looked inside. "I have," she said. "In some of the towers. The uppermost rooms."

They had gone into the towers to die, most of them — floor after floor of withered, childlike corpses, flesh so soured by the Hand that it was toxic even to corrupting microorganisms. A thousand towers, a million rooms,

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legions of carcasses in this one city, and the same all across the planet — across a hundred planets.

"I left them," she said dully. "I just didn't want them."

Bergstrom took the pouch from her. "It's all right," he said.

He followed her across the plaza, frowning.

TRASH LAY SCATTERED around the tower where they'd lived the past week, a tapered cylinder two hundred meters tall, its weathered facade the color of old bone. A portable airlock was cemented roughly across the entrance; rubbery fabric sealed the windows on the ground floor. The other two sledges were drawn up outside, one piled high with loot, the other with their equipment and the remaining stores.

Junior looked up as they approached, then went back to lashing down their gear. Without a word, Cara walked over to supervise. Bergstrom watched her a moment, his mouth set, before he cycled through the airlock.

The room on the other side took up most of the first floor. Beneath the rubbish scattered underfoot, inscribed tiles created complex patterns; thin, graceful columns poured upward into a vaulted ceiling. A dozen lamps floated about the chamber, projecting wan heat and a dull red luminescence. The bloody glow fell across two of the kurtikutts as they broke down the atmosphere plant. They worked side by side and in silence, perfectly coordinated, stoically efficient. Cara called them The Twins, though the Third Born outweighed his younger brother by at least twenty kilograms.

The pressurized shelter Bergstrom had shared with Cara sat in the far corner, collapsed and rolled into a neat bundle. He settled onto it, cracked open his helmet faceplate and took a shallow breath: heavy, shockingly cold, stinking of methane and the kurtikutts' vinegar reek.

A shadow fell across him. "Your mate her treasure found, and we ours as well," said a voice so deep he felt it in his bones. "And you, Beergstromm?"

"I found what I was looking for," he said flatly. "Clues to how the Hand came, and why. Whether it will come again."

The First Born towered over him, a wall of scarred leather draped in

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elaborate robes. A jeweled scabbard hung from the silver sash knotted at his waist; one big, seven-fingered hand rested idly on the blade's hilt. His thick arms were bare, corded with muscle and old scars. More scar tissue ran like a river down one side of his head, across the hollow right eye socket and along his throat. His remaining eye was like an opal, unblinking, unreadable.

"Dusty words, and dust," the First Born growled. "Your mate's treasure is more of my liking."

"When the Hand reaches for you," Bergstrom said, "see if it will take a bag of gold instead."

The kurtikutt glared, then threw back his head and laughed, a coyote howl that sent shivers down Bergstrom's spine. "If the Hand comes," the First Born said, "I will send it to you, your sharp tongue to cut it, Beergstromm."

He grimaced. Cara had wanted to buy their way onto one of the kurtikutts' expeditions for years. The Ruhk'thmar pack had been working the fringes of the shadow trade for decades, buying coordinates and Portal access from corrupt operators, moving their loot through the black markets of a dozen worlds, and staying clear of both the syndicates and local authorities. They had no backers, no brokers, no permanent base of operations. Cara had finally caught up with the Chief a month ago, in a dive called The Cadaver Dog, not far from the stargate on Chimerine. Sooner or later, all the pirates came to Chimerine.

Behind him, the airlock cycled with a wheeze and a gasp of cold methane. Cara came through, then Junior.

"Your mate knows of value," the First Born said. "The Hand may come again — but she and I will be of wealth in the meantime, hey?"

Cara pulled off her helmet, gave the brute a sour glance and barked a handful of words in the kurtikutts' language. The First Born glowered.

"Private joke," Cara explained to Bergstrom. She smiled up at the kurtikutt. "You're in a big hurry-up, Chief, but your littlest brother is taking all day to align the Portal. How about a remedy?"

The First Born considered. "His ass I will kick," he decided. He lumbered toward the airlock.

Cara touched Bergstrom's arm. "This won't take long," she said. "Shorty just doesn't know when to stop fussing."

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"Better that than we end up scattered across the Arm. Teams do go out and never come back."

"That's not us, lover."

He took her hand. "I am an idiot, sometimes."

"Oh, you are not. Sometimes."

The Fourth Born brushed past, pushing a cart stacked with components of the atmosphere plant. His brother followed, carrying their shelter. After they had cycled through the airlock, Cara looked around the empty room and squeezed Bergstrom's hand. "Be a gentleman, sir, and walk me home?"

SHORTY WAS STILL WORKING at the tabs and levers of his homebrew device as Junior stood watch over the generator. The First Born paced alongside the Portal, then stalked up to the youngest kurtikutt. His bellow echoed from the towers. Eyes wide, Shorty ducked his head and stepped away from the apparatus. The First Born gestured sharply and The Twins dragged up the sledges, one brother yoked to each.

Junior moved forward, but the eldest kurtikutt put a hand to his brother's chest. Their conversation was like the rumbling of a waterfall. When it was over, Junior started back toward the tower they had occupied.

"Now what?" Cara demanded.

The First Born cocked his one eye in their direction. "Your treasure we carry," he growled. "You we do not." He pointed to the gate.

Cara shrugged. "Last one home, lover."

Bergstrom hesitated. "I still have a remote on its way in. I could — "

"We can't afford to write it off." She gave him a quick grin. "It's all right — you wait here until it finds its way back."

He watched her walk toward the Portal. Even bundled up in that clumsy suit, he could see the way she moved, the way she held herself. He remembered the nights on Flanders, and the warmth of her in the mornings, and he, too, wanted to be home again.

Static surged from his suit radio. "Just me, love," Cara said across the link. She looked over her shoulder, smiling. "Wanted to tell you not to wait *too* long...and remember I'll be waiting for you on the other side." He grinned. "And I wanted to tell you what I'd like to do when — "

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The transmission cut off as she crossed the Portal's interface, the darkness closing around her.

"Tease," Bergstrom said under his breath, but he was still smiling. He looked up into the pale yellow skies. Horizon to horizon, they stretched empty. "Come on, damn it."

"Beergstromm!" the First Born thundered. "Time marches!" He raised one scarred arm and The Twins started forward, sledges groaning, their runners gouging the alabaster tiles. The Proteus fluttered overhead, squawking in the pirates' language.

The Portal loomed before him, a cut of night framed against the jasmine sky, a black so deep and formless it hurt to look at it for very long.

A glove reached from it, fingers clutching. An arm. And Cara staggered from the Portal.

Bergstrom caught her and went down with her to the cold stone. Her eyes were wide, her face ashen and sheened with sweat; blood trickled from her nose, smearing her visor. Her mouth worked. "Evan," she said, the word faint beneath rasp of labored breath.

"It'll be all right, sweetheart. Everything's all right." He checked her suit's seals, the telltales on the environmental pack: temperature, integrity, radiation count, pressure, power. "There's nothing *wrong*, damn it."

She coughed, bright red blood splashing the inside of her helmet. "Oh, lover," she got out. "Oh, Evan, it was worse than you thought."

"*Cara*?"

He looked over his shoulder. The Second Born stood over him, hands working at his sides, but the other kurtikutts had drawn back. "We have to get the shelter rigged again," Bergstrom said. "And the med kit — " The words tumbled from him. "First — get that first, before the shelter, while we can still — "

None of them moved. Then Junior knelt ponderously. "She is dead, comrade." He touched her helmet with one finger.

Bergstrom slapped his hand away. "Get away from us, you fucking monster," he said, his face wet. "Get the hell away or I'll kill you all."

2

"The answer must be ours," the Second Born said in a low rumble. "What happened, we must know it."

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In the ruddy glow of a single floating lamp, dried blood painted black Cara's parted lips. Her eyes were closed, their lashes delicate traces against ivory skin. Golden hair spilled unruly across the blanket folded beneath her head.

It was the moment between one breath and another. Bergstrom had lived it before, with the sun coming up over the hills of Flanders, the light of dawn pouring through the bedroom window, as he waited for Cara to open her eyes and smile. It was the moment between sleeping and waking. He sat close by, and waited for her next breath.

"The Portal has murdered your mate," said the First Born, "and may yet us all." He sat on a crate away from the lamplight. "One exit there is, Beergstromm, and in time we must take it or wait for air and food to be exhausted." The other kurtikutts stirred, muttering.

"We are none of us chirurgeons, and we know little of your people," said Junior, his voice almost gentle. "Can you discover the means of her death?"

Bergstrom's eyes squeezed shut. "Just leave her alone."

The box creaked as the First Born stood. "The answer within her lies," he said, coming out of the darkness. Red light poured along the blade of his knife. "Perhaps I will search for it."

Junior reached for Bergstrom as he leaped, but his brother was quicker. The First Born's free hand clamped on Bergstrom's head, temples and crown. Bergstrom grunted as the vise squeezed; his boots kicked at empty air.

"Time marches," the kurtikutt hissed, his vinegary breath washing across Bergstrom's face.

"*Murdering... bastard,*" he forced out.

"The murderer I am not," said the First Born. "But hunted I have, and you are frail prey, Beergstromm."

The Second Born spoke a single harsh syllable. Blackness flooded Bergstrom's sight as the eldest tightened his grip and let loose a stream of words heavy as a hammer blow. Junior spoke again, vibrissae fanned stiffly from his wrinkled muzzle, and bared needle teeth.

The First Born snarled — this time something less than words — and spread his fingers wide. The floor came up at Bergstrom and smashed the breath from him. He lay there, his chest caught in bands of steel, his face to the icy flagstones. He winced at a hot, sweet stink, but it was Junior who

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came close and said, "You are not the sixth brother of our clutch, but you are our comrade of the hunt." He helped Bergstrom from the floor, set him on his feet as if he weighed nothing, and steadied him with one hand. "No harm will come to you, or further harm to your mate."

"She is dead," the First Born snarled. "We must find the reason."

"In your own way, comrade, will you try?"

"He will," said the First Born, "or — "

"Or he will not," said Junior. "Comrade?"

Bergstrom looked down the long, wavy blade of the First Born's kris. *Remember I'll be waiting for you on the other side*, she had said. He took a shallow breath — all he could manage — and measured the distance. Then the First Born shoved the dagger into its scabbard and folded his arms across his chest: the moment had passed.

"Weak prey," the kurtikutt grunted. "Too weak even to save himself."

"If we find the way, it will be a scholar who leads, not a hunter." Junior turned to Bergstrom. "Later, comrade?" he said quietly. "But not much later."

From the darkness at the back of the room, the atmosphere plant wheezed and grumbled. Near it, the remaining stores formed a small, untidy pile. And in the shadows a few meters away, a still form lay beneath a weathered tarpaulin. Bergstrom sank back.

The kurtikutts sat in a circle on the other side of the room, speaking in low voices. Junior glanced up as Bergstrom stirred, murmured a few words to the First Born, then stood and came over. "We discuss the paths we may take," he said. "My brother invites you to join us."

Bergstrom looked up, his face blank. Junior studied him for a few moments before settling onto his haunches alongside him. "This time you have spent with her, comrade — for you this hour was fleeting, but for us it stretched. Do you see my meaning?"

"I hear you."

"Come, then." He put a heavy hand on Bergstrom's arm. "On Chimerine, no one waits for us. In this trap we are alone. No one will save us unless it is we ourselves."

Bergstrom shrugged him off. "It should have been you, you know.

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You were going in first, the Chief stopped you, and it was her instead."

Junior's nostrils flared. "There were, here, lengths of gold cloth my brother remembered, a part of our treasure. I was sent to retrieve it. There was nothing more than that."

"Then show me the cloth."

"You are hunting, comrade, but there is no prey here."

"Show me the cloth," Bergstrom repeated. "We may be your comrades of the hunt, but we're not part of the clutch. Your little brother does a fair job on the Portal, but there's always a risk. The Chief let her take it."

"You know I mourn her," Junior said heavily. "In all the journeyings of the Ruhk'thmar, nothing of this like has happened. Always, all among us, kin and stranger both, returned safely home."

"Not this time," Bergstrom said.

She waited for him in the shadows. He went to her.

Bergstrom knelt by her side and slowly pulled back the tarp. He did not move again for a long while; then, when he did, it was to brush a few strands of hair from her face. Her skin was cold and hard as stone, but he did not pull away.

After a time he drew his fingers along her cheek, then across the ceramic helmet seal, to the suit's heavy, quilted fabric, the environmental pack. The status lights glowed wanly under his outstretched hand. The suit still lived, storage cells near capacity, air canisters charged, pressure regulators and recycling systems in readiness. He brought up the diagnostic displays in sequence: all green.

He paused, then lifted her nearer arm from the floor, wincing at its weight and stiffness, then flinched again as the mitt flopped loosely at the wrist. He fumbled at the wrist seal...and it slipped from his nerveless fingers, her arm hitting the floor with a dull thud. A small sound came from the back of his throat.

"Comrade." Junior came over. "The glove?"

Bergstrom only nodded.

Junior worked silently at the seal. Soon the mitt came free, rough cloth rasping on smooth skin. Her hand was pale, almost luminescent; thin fingers clutched at nothing. Bergstrom motioned, and the kurtikutt passed him the mitt. "Now the other one," Bergstrom said. "Wait...the helmet first, over there."

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The Second Born reached across Cara's legs, lifted the helmet easily with one hand and put it in Bergstrom's arms. "Are there tools I will need?" the kurtikutt asked, not looking at him.

Bergstrom stared at the helmet, the smear of blood inside the visor, the dozen or so long, blonde hairs caught in the convolutions of the foam padding. "I won't let you cut her," he said. "You'll have to kill me first." His fingers trembled against the chill metal, the faceplate's crystal, the roughness of scrapes and scratches left by generations of explorers, and uncounted explorations. He knew them all...but for one, fresher than the rest.

Junior reached for her other hand. "If there were a thing to find within her, we would not see it," the kurtikutt said. "I will tell my brother this." He unfastened the cuff seal, then grasped her tightly clenched fist and, gently, opened it.

A sullen fire burned in her palm. The kurtikutt inhaled sharply, the breath whistling through his teeth. "Comrade...."

The jewel fell free, watery red light pouring along its smooth curves, glittering on the etched patterns, gathering within its heart. Bergstrom caught it as it fell, hissing as the cold stone burned him. He closed his fist around it, holding the hurt.

The kurtikutt shrank back. "My brother took a few of these," he said. "But for me, there is a stink to them."

"She thought so, too." The ruby egg warmed slowly in his hand.

"But it is, I know, nothing but dead stone."

"Yes."

"Do you think there are spectres, comrade?" the kurtikutt said suddenly.

Bergstrom looked up, the blood pounding in his head.

"A spirit that wears the body," the Second Born said, his eyes on Bergstrom's. "A thing that lives on after the body dies."

Looking away, Bergstrom shook his head. "No. But I wish I did."

The First Born stalked over to them. "You did not dig deeply," he growled.

Junior glided to his feet. "There was no need," he said. "The scent, I think we have it now."

"This?" The First Born took the jewel from Bergstrom and held it up

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to the light. "A bit of treasure it is, and nothing more. I have many like it." Black lips skinned back from yellowed fangs. "You would sell this, Beergstromm? Soon, perhaps, for air to breathe."

"She didn't have it when she went through the Portal," Bergstrom said. "She had it when she came back."

The First Born glared. "Fools, both of you, and I trapped with you."

"Her suit is intact," Bergstrom said. "Operational. No sign of radiation, pressure, acceleration, electrical shock, tidal forces. Nothing."

"This we already suspected. These would have left their mark. But inside her? In the mouth there is blood."

"She bit her tongue," Bergstrom said. "Her nose is bloody. She hurt herself. Her face hit the inside of the helmet."

"What reason for this?" the First Born snapped. "If she stumbled, where did she fall? If she was put to ground, what hunted her?" He snarled. "What remains is meat. *She* is gone, Beergstromm. Too much time have we wasted, respectful of meat." He swung toward Junior. "You said it should be so. She is his, yes, but if there is answer in her, it is ours."

"She had time enough to realize what was happening," Bergstrom said. "It might have been a heart attack. Or stroke."

"And of this there would be no sign?" the First Born demanded.

"To a medician, yes," Bergstrom said. "To us, no. The damage would be too subtle. For a stroke, a burst blood vessel somewhere in the brain. For a heart attack...I don't know if that produces any visible sign at all. Maybe a change in the blood chemistry."

"You may deceive us in this," the First Born said.

"Yes," Bergstrom said. "Does it matter? *You* wouldn't find anything, and I won't look."

"There is a strength in you, Beergstromm," the kurtikutt growled, "though it is buried deep." Junior opened his mouth, but the eldest cut him off with a snarl. "We are as hatchlings, eyes still closed! We do not know the means of her death — whether from within her, or of the Portal, or by some hunter on the other side. We must learn the truth of it, and set right the Portal if we can."

"It may be operating as intended," Bergstrom said flatly. "On my world, an ancient civilization constructed magnificent tombs for their royalty. Their treasure was buried with them, so they would have it in the

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afterlife. And thick walls, hidden passages, traps, and sorcerers' curses protected their treasure from thieves in this life."

"You believe we are accursed, Beergstromm?"

"These people knew their world was being murdered. Maybe they set a trap for the murderer and it caught us, instead."

"*Fanciful.*" The whisper drifted from the back of the room. Behind it came wet, meaty sounds, growing louder. Something moved there in the darkness, half-seen, unfolding itself until it stood close to three meters tall. "*Their technology was vastly inadequate,*" said the graveyard voice.

"Holy Father," Bergstrom whispered.

It came out of the shadows, muscles squirming beneath a scaly hide, red lamplight glinting from the spikes that flared across its massive shoulders. One large eye, black and moist, gleamed from beneath a thick ridge of bone. The wide mouth parted slightly, revealing rows of thorns painted with faintly luminescent drool. The thorns rustled, producing words: "*We must explore the Portal.*"

Distantly, Bergstrom heard Junior make a sound not far from a whine, barely audible and quickly stilled. Behind him, the younger kurtikutts backed away.

"You wear a hunter's skin now," the First Born said, "but I remember when you were but a small bird." His nostrils flared. "A brainless bird, and ill-spoken. Your form is not all that changes."

Towering over the kurtikutt, the Proteus smiled with its mouth full of thorns. Beneath his battered hide, the First Born's muscles were rigid with tension. But he kept his hand well away from the hilt of his knife.

"*If we are to live, we need more information,*" said the Proteus. It indicated one of The Twins, who cowered. "*This one is not vital. It will enter the Portal.*"

Junior took a step forward. "No one of my brothers will be sacrificed." He glanced at Bergstrom, then quickly away. "No one else will be sacrificed."

The Proteus hissed. "*Do not challenge me in this,*" it said. "*I move to save us all.*" It spread its hands, steely serrated claws gleaming in the lamplight. Junior crouched and moved slowly to one side, flanking the monster. The First Born fell back, the kris suddenly appearing in his hand.

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"Be careful with him," Bergstrom said, his mouth dry, "but he's not all he seems to be."

The Proteus swung its ridged skull toward him. A faint reek of ozone wafted from the creature.

Bergstrom looked up into its faceted eye. "That's a frightening package," he said, "but you can't mass more than fifteen or twenty kilograms. Stick him with your knife, Chief, and he'll pop like a balloon."

"Beergstromm, what is your tongue after now?" He did not look away from the shapeshifter.

"How much would you say he weighs?" Bergstrom asked. "Twice what you do?"

"Perhaps," said the kurtikutt, "but I have taken larger prey."

"And when he wore wings and feathers, how much did he weigh then?" Bergstrom said steadily. "He can't create mass, just redistribute it. Keep watching him, though. He may not be in your weight class, but he's got the reach."

Junior's muzzle wrinkled. His tongue lolled from his mouth and he raised one hand to cover it. Laughter, Bergstrom realized.

The First Born glared at the Proteus for a moment more, then shoved the kris into its scabbard. "Trickery," he growled. "And as time runs from us."

The Proteus shrugged, a quite human gesture. "*We require stronger leadership,*" it said. It was already shrinking, softening, the spikes and ridges withdrawing into its oily hide. "*Our status remains unchanged. One must enter the Portal.*"

Junior looked at Bergstrom. "Comrade, what of your robots? Send one machine into the Portal, and look through its eyes."

He shook his head. "Not once it crosses the interface. Nothing can — "

"Transmission of information across the Portal would violate relativity," the Proteus said in a voice now blurred and vaguely feminine.

The creature's hide had smoothed. Its trunk narrowed; arms and legs thinned. The head became an ovoid, featureless except for a narrow, lipless slit for a mouth.

"That includes nerve impulses," Bergstrom said, his heart racing as the Proteus transformed itself. "Otherwise I'd suggest you stick your head in and look around, Chief."

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The Proteus smiled at Bergstrom with white, even teeth. The skin stretched across its skull fell in, leaving two round holes. Eyes surfaced from within them, black pupils ringed by electric blue irises. The head tilted back; graceful fingers caressed golden hair. Delicate laughter echoed.

"Is this form more to your liking, Bergstrom?" it said with her voice. Her eyes stared at him; her hands roamed over her throat, her breasts, her stomach. "Or do you still find me frightening?"

Bergstrom looked away. "Not now, comrade," Junior said quietly from behind him. "But later. Yes, later."

The First Born sighed. "These games go on too long," he said. "I am thinking now of your ancient kings, Beergstromm."

"A pretty theory," the Proteus said in her voice, "but these people did not have the means."

"They may have traded for the technology," Junior said, "in the time before the Hand. Or a visitor may have laid the trap, if trap there is."

"Trap or accident," the First Born said, "the answer we must find, and quickly." He knuckled the scar tissue around his empty eye socket. "We put aside air, water, and food to last the span of the hunt and little more. Even the power goes, too quickly. The motes at its heart, the light and shadow...." His teeth clashed. "Beergstromm, your tongue be damned!"

"The antimatter within the generator decays at a constant rate," Junior explained. "We can tap its power, but not conserve it. And when it is gone, we cannot tame the Portal."

"How long do we have?" Bergstrom asked.

Junior looked across the chamber and spoke a few words of kurtikutt; Shorty's reply was barely audible. "Twelve hours remain to us before the power has grown too weak," Junior said. "Even before that, my brother tells me, grasping the Portal at Chimerine grows difficult."

"Then perhaps you'll finally accept the wisdom of my advice," the Proteus said to Bergstrom, running her hands over her hips. "You know I'm right, lover. Tell them."

The First Born sprang, silent, and put his kris to the side of the Proteus's neck. Blue eyes widened, but otherwise the creature remained motionless.

"This game tires me," the kurtikutt said low in his throat. "End it, or your head I will take."

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The Proteus smiled thinly. "You must know that wouldn't kill me."

"It would be of an inconvenience," the First Born said. It pressed knife to skin, drawing a thin rivulet of blood. Despite everything, Bergstrom's eyes stung to see it.

"Why do you take his part?" the Proteus asked mildly. "He is useless to us."

The kurtikutt's knife arm trembled. "He is our comrade of the hunt," he said. "End it, now."

The Proteus shrugged. "If it will please you." Without moving its head, the monster shifted its eyes to Bergstrom's. Its smile broadened, becoming sad and sweet as the familiar curves flattened, the pink skin bleached white, and the long, buttery hair withdrew into the scalp. The lips went last, leaving the mouth a narrow slit with ends upturned.

When it was over, the metamorph stood a meter and a half tall, fragile and childlike, its translucent skin taut over thin bones. The lipless mouth smiled, the slitted nostrils flared slightly, and the fiend looked at him with eyes that had through the metamorphosis remained warm and wide and blue.

Bergstrom looked into Cara's eyes and said: "There may be another way."

3

The wind blew along the streets of the dead city, rushing in through all its gaping windows and running out through all its empty doors. It stole across the merchants' stalls and whispered through the gallows' open trap. In the plaza, it lifted a shroud of dust and set the motes to glittering against the stargate's starless night. Bergstrom sat close by, and felt in him the Portal's vast emptiness.

A dozen meters off, Shorty's fingers moved slowly across the control surfaces of his handmade tuning rig. The First Born towered over him, one hand on his jeweled scabbard. Shorty had been at work for the better part of an hour, but the First Born stayed silent.

Twisting a coiled rope, Junior settled alongside Bergstrom's camp chair. "Is there a thing I can do?" the kurtikutt asked, his voice muffled only slightly by the transparent breathing mask he wore.

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Sunlight glinted from Bergstrom's visor as he looked into the empty saffron sky. "There's one still out there," he said half to himself. "I was waiting for it, and she went through first. It never came back."

"Later, comrade. Later."

"She'd be angry. Half our profits to replace it." He closed a panel in the robot's breast. The device was inert for a few seconds, then shook its graphite wings. Its head began to turn on its thin neck, back and forth, scanning.

"It will remember for us now?" the kurtikutt said.

"It was built to relay data to my recording rig in real time," Bergstrom said tonelessly, "but it has some onboard storage. I've reconfigured most of the memory, disabled half the sensors, stepped down the resolution of the others. It won't see much, but it'll remember what it sees — an hour's worth, at least, which is more than we need." Standing, he looked toward the First Born.

The eldest squatted beside Shorty and spoke with him for a few moments, then got to his feet again and came over. "My brother says the Portal is seemingly as it was before," he said, "as if it would lead to Chimerine." He glanced down. "I tire of small birds."

"This one may save your miserable hide." Bergstrom handed the remote to Junior, who shook free a few meters of rope. Working quickly, he fashioned a harness that slipped over the robot's wings and was drawn tight across its breast. He finished it with a square knot and passed the remote back to Bergstrom. "It will not escape us," the kurtikutt said.

The First Born snatched the bird from Bergstrom before he could react. "You have a strength, Beergstromm, but it is not in your arm." He looped the free end of the rope around his waist, knotted it, then began whirling the robot over his head, paying out more line with each revolution.

Bergstrom stepped back. "Be careful with it, you bastard." The First Born wrinkled his muzzle and let the remote fly free. It arced toward the Portal, rope trailing, and met the ebony dome two-thirds of the way up. The robot seemed to hang there for an instant, then was gone. The rope fell after it, the first dozen meters or so disappearing into the interface, the rest hitting the paving stones with a muffled slap.

"Give it fifteen minutes," Bergstrom said, settling into his chair. His heart pounded.

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The First Born took some of the slack out of the rope and began looping it around his scarred forearm. "If there is a hunter on the other side," he said, "I am ready should your little bird it take for bait." He slid his kris from its scabbard, set it on the ground before him and settled onto his haunches, waiting.

BERGSTROM PRESSED a switch. And remembered: a carousel of images. The Portal, an arc of night. Bone-white towers, yellow sky. The plaza, three figures standing on the dusty stones, falling away (the kurtikutts, lambent in infrared, the First Born's hand still open, arm outstretched, and alongside them the environmental suit's cooler signature). The Portal again, a wall that grew to close out everything else. A shock, a surge, a deeper night, a time unending.

Then: the rush of air again across graphite wings, a sensation of falling, impact, and darkness.

But this was merely the absence of light. Obeying a deeply ingrained subroutine, the remote righted itself and looked around.

Painted in shades of sonar, the gallery stretched beyond his sensors' range. Ranks of willowy columns flowed from the etched floor and into the barrel ceiling high overhead. Elaborate patterns flowered along the stonework to frame row on row of shallow niches, making them part of the design. And within each niche a ruby egg, finely polished, intricately inscribed. A thousand rows, millions upon millions of stones.

The scene slid left, then right as the remote's head panned, the image repainting itself in radar, in infrared, then again in the visible spectrum before cycling back to sonar. Nothing moved. Nothing changed.

Long minutes passed. Then the view juddered, swaying crazily, the walls of the gallery slowly sliding past as the remote was drawn backward. Again the shock of translation across the infinite, the surge, and utter darkness. Now light again, the black wall stretching upward and the pale yellow sky above it, a mitted hand reaching down, and beyond it a crystal visor framing a drawn face: Bergstrom's own.

The playback ended, the virtual reality shattering, the sense of the dead world pouring in on him, the weight of his own meat and bone, stink of sweat, the sour taste in his mouth, and everything spinning, spinning.

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"Comrade...?" Junior squatted before him, his hands on Bergstrom's shoulders, his face too near. Weakly, Bergstrom pushed him away.

"No hunter," he said thickly. "No threat. A room, vast, somewhere near." He shook his head to clear it, then forced himself to his feet. "Like a church, dark, empty. Somewhere on this world, maybe in this city." He swayed and put a hand on the back of the chair, steadying himself. His environmental suit was awash in sweat. "Underground," he said. "I'm sure of it. It may be right under us."

The First Born stared at him, his teeth set in a carnivore rictus. "Nothing to have murdered your mate?"

"It's an empty room, damn it. No one there. No enemy for you to fight."

The kurtikutt looked at him a moment longer, then stalked off...not toward their camp, but across the square, and away. Junior watched him go. "Now we know no more than before," he said. "Your mate may have crossed into a place where the hunter lives, but you saw another land. Or the hunter may have gone from it. What you saw may have been a trick, a dream put into the machine. Or perhaps this is my dream, comrade." He looked up at the sound of wingbeats. "Or nightmare."

The Proteus swept down from the yellow sky, circling the Portal once before alighting a few meters away. Its head was human, or nearly so — stylized, glossy, a mannequin's head with high cheekbones, blue eyes, and long, blonde hair. The body was monstrous, an amalgam of raptor and reptile, with a thick, snakelike torso and clawed feet.

"You didn't listen to me," the Proteus said, its voice Cara's once again. "Now you've lost valuable time. And for you, time has nearly run out."

"But not for you," Bergstrom said.

The Proteus twisted its lips into a parody of a smile. "You know I am very adaptable," it said. "And very patient. If you do not find a way out, in time others will come. One of them will find the way." The creature flexed its harpy's wings. "I wish you could stay and keep me company, Evan, but I'm afraid you won't last long. You may have enough water, heat, and air for a while, but the food will go more quickly — if not yours, then the kurtikutts'. And when they grow hungry, lover, they will forget you are their comrade of the hunt."

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"My brother should have taken your head," Junior snarled. His eyes slid to Bergstrom. "Comrade, you know we would never —"

"Of course you would," Bergstrom said. "The monster is right about that...about a lot of things."

He walked slowly across the paving stones, each step raising a little cloud of dust. The black wall of the Portal loomed over him, closing out the city and the sky. He felt again its depth, its vast emptiness, and then a subtle vibration as he passed between the bands of smooth, gray metal that held fast the stargate.

"*Comrade!*"

The kurtikutt's voice echoed, the echoes lost as Bergstrom stepped into the Portal. Darkness enfolded him.

Utter lightlessness. Unspeakable cold. Silence, unmarked even by surge of blood or sough of breath. Time stretched, time enough to believe he would never draw breath again. A pressure, a straining, as if he were being pulled in a hundred different directions. Shapes formed within the darkness, patterns of night and shadow, taking on form, becoming the walls of the vault streaming past him, the unending cavern lit by the foxfire glow of a million jewels. Then a sudden surge, a burst of light, and Bergstrom was through to the other side...

And he was a merchant selling sweetbeetles, fruit vines and northlands succulents from his stall along the radian of the philosophers...

And she was a chancellor drinking up the vernal sun and the loving touch of her husbands in a parkland on the eastern verge...

And he was a sculptor shaping melancholy in his studio not far from the assembly of souls...

And she was a wright turning the shape of the Outsteppers' gate, and from her station watching another party of visitors stream into the world...

And he was a missioner falling to his knees on the bright alabaster stones.

"Comrade?"

Strong hands put him on his feet. He looked up, into the hard stones of a kurtikutt's eyes, and read in them not concern but mere curiosity — an almost predatory interest, abstract yet marbled with a primal taste for blood. More intriguing, though, was the undercurrent of profound loneliness.

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"Your kind does not often hunt alone," the missioner said in the kurtikutt's own language, barks and grunts that came awkwardly to him.

Beneath its transparent breathing mask, the animal's muzzle twitched. "I hunt here for trade, while my brothers await word."

"Passage is dear," the missioner said. The kurtikutt's lip curled, but he said nothing.

"Our world is poor," the missioner continued, "but I wish you good hunting." He felt in the kurtikutt's gaze a vague but growing suspicion. "Good hunting," he repeated, and turned away.

The tide of new arrivals surged around him, molegs and Yaenites, a small mob of kappans, a Simonswood in its articulated rambler, towering above all the others — a dozen or more breeds, and everywhere the humans, who roamed across all the worlds of the Outsteppers' net. His was a backwater planet to all their races, but still they came in search of trade, knowledge, adventure...or to try to satisfy the vague but powerful need that gnawed at so many of them. Their unruly personae spread across the plaza and along the city's radians, carrying with them subtle disorder.

The missioner closed his eyes and pushed himself outward, embracing the city, and it welcomed him with its gleaming towers and windswept streets, the places of assembly and sun-warmed commons, all suffused by the presence of his brothers and sisters, each soul a thread in the tapestry that wrapped the world: the Bonding. He sent himself out along the design, casting after the thread that bound him here most tightly and, finding it, he felt that soul tremble beneath the touch of his. She bore him up in warmth and love, and he knew he was home again.

And felt, only distantly, the vibration of heavy footsteps, his wife's quickening alarm as the rambler bore down on him. He stepped back, meeting up against rough, unyielding fabric. A hand clamped on his shoulder, holding him fast though he struggled. Venting steam and stink, the machine's metal foreleg swept past, close enough to stir his tunic, then the rear leg in turn. The Simonswood looked back from its throne, leafy ocher sensors rustling with agitation.

The hand fell from his shoulder. "You could have been killed." The tone was one of indifference.

The missioner turned, and shivered. It was a human, sealed up in the

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rude second skin that carried her environment. Lips pressed to a thin line, she stared at him through the bubble enclosing her head. Looking into her cold blue eyes, he saw...nothing. He had fallen against her, he had not known she was there, close by, because there was in her no life or thought, only a cold emptiness. *Nothing.*

The thing tilted its head, as if listening to something in the distance. "You are frightened," it said, and its voice was a hundred voices. "What are you frightened of?"

"*You.*" His gathering fear set a strain on the fabric; in answer he felt vague concern, and one bright chord of alarm from his wife. "Stay away," the missioner said, as much to her as to the monster.

It gripped his hand in its heavy mitt, and smiled. The crowd streamed past, heedless, the wide-eyed kappans pointing at the fine, gleaming towers, the Yaenite mob grumbling and muttering, a pair of humans looking all around them and everywhere at once. From them he felt anxiety and anticipation and determination and wariness: life.

The creature's grip tightened. Muscle bruised, bone creaked; the missioner nearly cried out, but did not. "You feel it coming," it said in its terrible chorus. "I see it in you."

"What *are* you?" he gasped.

"You know who I am," it said. "I was here long before these others, long before even your kind. I have always walked among them, these vermin, and since last we met, I have watched their numbers grow, their contagion spread. The Bonding put a name to me long ago, speaking it only in the darker places."

"*No.*" He recoiled as the monster reached with its other mitt, but it merely caressed the side of his face, the rough cloth oddly gentle on his skin. "We destroyed you."

"You tried, you and the Outsteppers. But you only wounded me. You drove me from the light of all your suns, into the shadows." It paused, seeming to listen again, and its smile became a snarling rictus. "I rested there, gathering strength, watching. Learning how to exterminate you, as I did the Outsteppers."

It began to change, the curves and folds of the environmental suit softening. The lines of its face melted, the eyes fell in. The helmet puffed out and then collapsed, flowing into the streaming flesh. Cloth and meat

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fell away from the hand that still brushed his face, baring a claw of gleaming bone. He bit back a scream as the talons sank into his flesh.

Around him, the crowd twitched as if stung. A cry went up; a shriek; confusion and fright rushed outward, diminishing as it rippled through the mob, those dim intelligences even a few meters away remaining oblivious.

The missioner cast across the Bonding and it strained, it *tore*, as bright points of fear blossomed in the fabric. It was everywhere; whatever it was, it was everywhere in his world at once.

A big hand lashed out, slapping the claw away in a spray of black muck and flecks of the monster's brittle bone, and the missioner fell. The kurtikutt stood over him, nostrils flared, shaking. He snarled, the sound cutting through the rush and rumble of the mob.

In the sudden silence the demon laughed, a wet, bubbling sound that welled from its depths. It raised its arms, stretching itself against the sky. Its skin grew taut and smooth, paled, turning smoky, then transparent as the monster spread itself on the wind. Taller than the Outsteppers' gate, then higher than any of the towers, barely visible now, a stain, ghostly, billowing, still growing, still laughing — a thin, vaporous laugh, a memory, a nightmare.

The shouting began. The screams. The mob buffeted him, visitors running from the square. A human female brushed by him, and he saw in her bright, metallic fear. An omblegenna came after, its four snakelike arms flailing. The Simonswood's rambler stampeded back toward the gate; one of the kappans fell under the churning metal legs, its high-pitched screams quickly silenced. The missioner felt its pain only distantly before that, too, was extinguished.

The missioner put one hand to his face and it came away wet with blood. The kurtikutt pulled him roughly to his feet. "You will live," he said, "but not if we stay here."

The sky had turned gray, the sun dim behind it. It was, he knew, the same all across his world.

"Comrade...." the kurtikutt rasped, the fear boiling off him. "This hunter — we must find a place away from it."

"If you can," said the missioner, and laid his hand on the beast's head. The kurtikutt flinched at the contact, but some of the fear slipped from him.

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"My brothers — "

"I think you will be with them soon."

The demon's shape filled half the sky, the vaguest of shadows, a breath of night, nearly imperceptible. It continued to stretch, shafts of saffron sunlight pushing through...then it burst, becoming a cloud of gray dust that drifted down, dreamlike.

On the winds he heard its laughter.

He closed his eyes. The clamor of the mob receded, and the kurtikutt's next words, the sounds of his own heart and breath. He found his wife waiting, filled with fear and love and longing. He wrapped himself in her, then cast himself further out, across the fabric of the Bonding.

It was the same all over: a hundred soulless, lightless monsters; their transformation; twilight everywhere; now a rain of dust.

The missioner opened his eyes again as a stillness settled over the square. The kurtikutt stood close by, breathing hard, watching the dust drift down. It stained the alabaster paving stones and drew a film across the towers. It settled on the missioner's outstretched hands, black against his white skin, fading to gray, vanishing. Burrowing. Leaving trails of white heat through his flesh.

The kurtikutt howled, slapping at himself. "*Comrade....*" Eyes fierce, it turned on him. The missioner braced himself...but the kurtikutt shook himself once all over and sprinted into the crowd, leaving a trail of dazed and fallen visitors.

The Outsteppers' gate stood impassive above the mob, dark and empty, a hole cut through the universe, humming faintly.

Twitching, the missioner hugged himself. Screams echoed from the towers. The wind carried to him the stinks of smoke and gore. A kappan blundered into him, bleeding from a dozen cuts. An omblegenna clutched at him with its tentacles, then was carried away. The missioner turned, and stared into the face of one of his brothers. One eye, nearly closed, wept blood; the other was wide and wild. The missioner held him for a moment, the pain washing over him, drowning him, then pushed him away. So much pain, a world of it. He sent himself into it, covered himself with it, to find the one he loved.

I am coming.

He went out into the city.

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Smoke and chaos filled its radians. A team of helpbeasts dragged an overturned cart. A gray-muzzled kurtikutt crouched in a doorway, pawing at anything that came near. Merchants' stalls were upended. A pack of kappans stoned a human; helmet broken, she choked on bitter air before her skull was crushed. Guideposts were toppled; lost and frightened, newly released souls circled the ruins of their blood-red lattices. The missioner hurried past a gallows, where brothers murdered brothers.

Through smoke and over barricades, sometimes seeking the shadows while violence passed, down streets where blood ran free. Then he was home, stumbling over the corpse in the doorway, up the stairs, higher and higher, to where she waited. He took her in his arms and held her, taking up her love and warmth, and put his hands to her throat. Her soul was freed, flying above the city, the smoke, the death and madness, hurrying away, to the other side.

He could not follow. Instead he climbed higher, into the tower's uppermost reaches, and then outward, across the torn and burning fabric of the world...

And he was a merchant, the life seeping from him in a smashed stall along the radian of the philosophers...

And she was a chancellor, giving her husbands release in a parkland on the eastern verge before turning the blade on herself...

And he was a sculptor, shaping rage and torment in his studio not far from the assembly of souls, as his blood ran from half a hundred wounds...

And she was a wright, turning the shape of the Outsteppers' gate so death could not escape, as the mob screamed outside her station's door and fire blackened her skin...

And he was a man, standing in the gallery, a chamber big enough to hold a world, column upon graceful column, line upon finely etched line, row upon row of recesses carved into living stone, in each a ruby egg, millions upon millions, polished, glittering, glowing, warm. *Souls.*

...and he fell to his knees on the dusty stones.

He lay there, face pressed to the inside of his helmet, chest heaving, stale, recycled air sawing his throat, until big hands turned him gently onto his back. Junior looked down at him. "You live," he said. "Comrade, *you live.*"

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Bergstrom swallowed bile and coughed, spattering his faceplate with filmy blood. His tongue was thick in his mouth; sounds came out, but no words. His left hand clutched at Junior's robes; his right arm was dead-weight. The kurtikutt helped him sit up, cradling Bergstrom against his chest. The First Born looked on, and behind him the Proteus, still wearing its harpy's wings.

"Beergstromm," said the eldest, "that strength you have, I think it is not in your head, either." He bared yellow teeth.

"Mon...ster," Bergstrom slurred. "Bass...tard."

Junior tensed. "Comrade, there is no need — "

The Proteus folded its wings and stared at him with hard eyes. A smile split its mannequin's face.

"*Kill...it*," Bergstrom got out. "*Kill it!*"

Sunlight flashed on the First Born's kris, but the Proteus was suddenly elsewhere, its form blurring as it moved. Leathery wings stretched and thinned in an instant, becoming a nest of lashing tentacles. Its skull lengthened, becoming lean and predatory, its mouth agape. The kurtikutt backed away, knife extended. A tentacle briefly wrapped his forearm, coming away with a sucking sound. Blood sprayed from flesh made ragged; bone shone bright white deep within the wound. Silent, the First Born passed the kris to his other hand.

He circled, the blade moving slowly back and forth. Blood streamed down his arm and onto the paving stones. "Beergstromm...." he hissed.

"His kind...." Bergstrom fought to make the words. "They...brought the plague. They *are*...the Hand."

The First Born grinned. "When you were a small bird," he told the Proteus, "I should have taken your head then." He lunged, and missed. A tentacle shot out, slapping his leg. Flesh ripped, blood gouted, and the First Born went down, rolling in the dust. The Proteus's neck telescoped, the head lunging forward, jaws wide, fangs gleaming wetly — snapping shut on nothing as the First Born rolled underneath, the kris slashing upward, cutting through the scaly neck.

Black sap fountained from the stump. The head rolled for meters.

The First Born struggled to his feet, the blood running from him. Tentacles whipped blindly. He gripped them one after the other, severing each. The trunk lay at his feet, inky slime pulsing from its wounds.

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"Not dead," the First Born said raggedly. "But inconvenienced." He swayed, the kris slipping from his fingers to clatter on the pavement. Blood drenched his tunic. Junior went to his side, then looked across the plaza and called his brothers with a howl that made Bergstrom shiver.

Bergstrom got his legs under him and stood.

"Comrade," Junior said, "you are hurt."

"Nerve damage," Bergstrom said, the words still indistinct. "Stroke, maybe. Like her." He started toward the kurtikutts, his right foot dragging.

"We both are battle-scarred, Beergstromm." The First Born's muzzle twitched. "I could die now, I think."

The other kurtikutts ran up, their gnarls and growls filling the square. Junior cut them off with a roar, then lowered the First Born to the ground. He ripped his own tunic into strips and began binding his brother's wounds. The First Born grunted, his eye closing.

"You will not die," Bergstrom said, the barks and grunts strange in his mouth. "Not unless you are too much a miser to pay a chirurgeon on Chimerine."

Junior gaped at him. The First Born's good eye fluttered open. "You did not know our tongue before," he said.

"I know it now." Bergstrom's face twisted. "I *remember* it."

"If a trick this is...." The First Born tried to rise. "No, it is madness upon you. A wound in the brain you said, it may have murdered your mate, and now in you...." He fell back, breathing hard. "And mad was I to listen to you."

Junior put his hand on his brother's head. "Comrade. *Comrade!*" Bergstrom looked at him, trying to focus. "What is this thing in you?"

He shook his head. A thousand voices filled his ears, a million remembrances crowded in on him, filling him. But already they were fading, slipping from him one by one.

"Memories," he said. "Answers." He staggered, but the Fifth Born steadied him before he could fall. "These people...the Bonding. What it was like to be here when the Hand came down. To die...to feel a million deaths, all at once. How they twisted the Portal, so it led just one way. How to get home. *How we can get home.*"

"Madness," the First Born muttered.

"Or not," Junior said. "We can follow him, or wait here for death. For

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you it will come sooner, without a chirurgeon, but it will come for all of us soon enough." To Bergstrom: "You can find the way to Chimerine?"

"With Shorty's help. But first, there's something else that needs doing." He turned to The Twins. "Bring the shapeshifter to the Outsteppers' gate," he said in their language. "*Now.*"

They looked to Junior, who barked his assent. They hurried off. Shorty trailed Bergstrom as he followed unsteadily.

When he reached The Twins, they were standing well back from the Proteus's head. One kurtikutt held its trunk, which writhed sluggishly in its grasp; the other held the tentacles far from its body.

The Proteus's teeth clashed as Bergstrom knelt in front of the sleek skull. It was metamorphosing, but haltingly. Buds formed on its underside — the start of legs, perhaps. Bony ridges thickened, the Proteus's eyes burning from beneath them. The teeth snapped again, then shortened, withdrawing into the jaw. Lips formed, wrinkled, spat out: "Death to you. Death to you."

He grasped the skull behind its ferocious mouth, its oily hide writhing under his hands. "And you're going to live forever," Bergstrom said, "in the room where all your victims are waiting."

Grunting, he threw the Proteus toward the wall of night.

Its scream was cut short, leaving only silence.

4

The sun came up over the western hills and set the morning mist aglow. The fog wrapped wooded slopes and green valleys, a turquoise lake burning with dawn's light. High clouds streaked a delicate blue sky. Not Flanders' sun or sky, but Chimerine's; still, it made his throat ache to see it. Bergstrom had the bed raise him up, and held the jewel to the light. The sunlight poured like molten fire along the lines and channels etched into it, forming patterns he could no longer read.

The door opened tentatively. "Comrade?" Junior looked in. "It was a long hunt to find you, the hospital is so large."

"It needs to be," Bergstrom said. "A lot of people get hurt out there." He slipped the ruby egg under the covers. "Come in."

"Sure thing." He held the door open and the First Born hobbled in, one

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arm and one leg wrapped in sleek green bandages. Junior pulled a chair away from the wall and his brother settled into it.

"I wondered if you could bear to pay a medician," Bergstrom said.

"Thieves, all of them," the First Born growled. "But, good fortune, they don't know how to bargain. And you, Beergstromm? A damage to the nerves, they tell me."

"They're repairing it, but it takes time."

"And treasure," the First Born said, "but that hunts for you now. The knowledge of that place gathered a high price."

"We shouldn't have sold it."

"Make of it a charity?" the First Born rumbled. "And for charity they would heal both of us, and give you means to live until you are well enough to go out again? This is the way of it, Beergstromm: To everything there is a price. Better than most, you know that."

Silence fell across the room. Into it Junior said, "Across all the worlds we hunt them."

"And how many of us have they killed?"

The eldest's look turned sour. "Able hunters they are. The fight will be long."

"It'll never end," Bergstrom said. "They're all pieces of the same organism, like a cancer — leave one piece alive and it will all grow back. Next time it will be stronger, smarter. Its hate will be stronger, too. It wants the universe to itself again."

"My hate also is strong," the First Born said.

Bergstrom sat up with a muffled groan. "We're like animals to them — vermin. The war probably started when my ancestors were still in the trees. The Outsteppers fell first, but the Proteus were beaten back. When the shapeshifters returned, it was as the Hand, making themselves into new strains for each species. Then the Bonding fell...along with a hundred other races. Now we're the only ones left to stand against them — the survivors."

"The Bonding were a gentle people," Junior said.

"Yes." Bergstrom's look was distant. Their memories were gone from him, but he recalled their flavor. Each of his brothers and sisters, their experiences stored in crystal matrices — not dead histories, but undying souls. The gallery — not a dusty library, or a monument, but a temple.

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"You have to be gentle, when you can read another's thoughts and feel another's pain."

"We are not a gentle people," Junior said. "And we do not have to learn how to be hunters."

The First Born shifted in his chair, wincing. "For the hurt both we took," he said, "for the death of Cara Ausstenn, we will kill them each. There is a bounty, and I will be of wealth from it. You will visit me in the house they build for the Ruhk'thmar."

Bergstrom frowned. "Not if you get any slower, Chief."

The First Born barked a laugh. Junior tried to help him to his feet, but the eldest shrugged him off. "I am not so feeble as believes our scholar." Suddenly he took Bergstrom's hand in his; the kurtikutt's skin was warm and coarse. "Comrades of the hunt, Beergstromm — and sixth brother of the Ruhk'thmar, if you will honor me."

Bergstrom looked into the obsidian eye, flat and dead. "Brothers," he said.

The First Born gripped his hand more tightly, then released him. He glanced over his shoulder. "My stomach is hollow! The food here is of a garbage heap, and there's little of it."

"We will search out something fit," Junior said. He watched as his brother limped from the room, then turned back to Bergstrom. "He will not hunt again, but he will keep his promise. From his bed he began gathering teams of hunters. They will be his claws and teeth." He came up to the bed. "And where does the hunt bring you?"

"I'm going to take Cara home," Bergstrom said. "After that...I don't know. I've spent my whole life sifting the ruins for bits of the past. For a few moments, I knew it all. I *lived* it. I could spend the rest of my life trying to get that back again."

"It would be a good life, I think," Junior said. "After you take her home, comrade, come and find us."

When he had gone, Bergstrom looked out over the green hills and blue skies, so much like home's. He put his hand around the jewel again and felt in it a familiar warmth, and a longing. *I'm waiting for you on the other side.*

"I'm sorry, sweetheart," he said as the dawn's light poured through the window. "You'll have to wait a while longer."

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COMING ATTRACTIONS

WE'VE CONSULTED ORACLES, employed scrying devices, and called the hotline for psychics. The signs are clear. We know what's coming. Listen up and learn the future.

The return of Kevin Grierson is in the immediate future. We had thought him gone from our pages for good, but like a classical Greek hero, he trekked back from the Underworld to bring us good entertainment. Richard Bowes's "So Many Miles to the Heart of a Child" returns to New York to explore an ominous carousel and to explore also the ways in which we're all bound to our pasts.

Speaking of heroes, another one is warming up now in the bullpen—Rick Wilber brings him to us in "Straight Changes." Spring training always evokes images of titanic duels between the greats, living legends and rookies alike preparing for the season ahead and a run at the pennant. "Straight Changes," however, focuses on a minor league coach who still pitches in a senior men's league. His story reminds us of how we can all—even the dead—send them down in order once in a while...and of what really matters when the ninth inning comes around.

And now the portents are unclear. We see book reviews by Charles de Lint and Elizabeth Hand. We see a film column by Kathi Maio. We see Gregory Benford exploring the office of the future. But what of the fiction? Will Michael Swanwick's "Mother Grasshopper" bestow its gravid wisdom upon us? Or will we have new fiction from Bruce Sterling? And when can we expect new stories by Esther Friesner, Kristine Kathryn Rusch, Ron Goulart, or Terry Bisson? Will Mark Geston really be turning in a new story? Did we hear the name Robert Sheckley whispered?

The truth is murky, but one answer is clear: the muses are singing and the writers are writing. We see many good things ahead.

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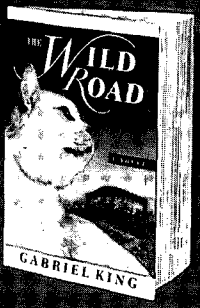

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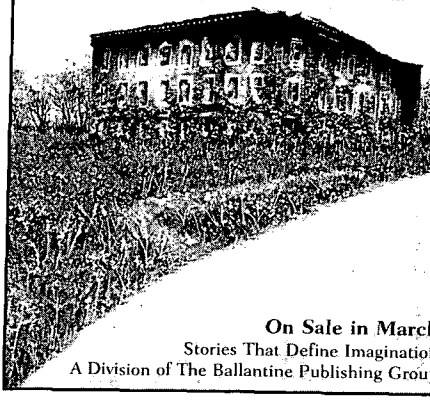

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